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TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 1466.

VANESSA.

IN ONE VOLUME.

"This weak impress of love is as a figure
Trenched in ice, which with an hour's heat
Dissolves to water and doth lose its form.
A little time will melt her frozen thoughts,
And worthless Valentine shall be forgot."

The Two Gentlemen of Verona.

VANESSA

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "STILL WATERS," "DOROTHY,"

ETC.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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VANESSA.

CHAPTER I.

The Chrysalis.

ALLERTON is one of the small, sleepy little towns which drag on an unprosperous existence in the rural districts of southern England. It can boast of a weekly market, and contains a decadent grammar school and a County Bank, and in the High Street are substantial houses with stone facings, which recall the days of its earlier grandeur, when the Hunt Ball was held at the "Red Lion," and was an era in the lives of the county gentry, and when two mail-coaches changed horses daily at the entrance of the inn-yard, which is now only tenanted by two shabby flies and a four-wheeled trap. Those palmy days are long since gone by, and the rising generation of Allerton is too far removed from them to hanker after the past, however much some of its more aspiring spirits may chafe against the sordid round of cares, the petty *traccasseries*, and local interests among which their lot is cast.

Some such dissatisfaction may have filled the hearts of the two sisters who sat at work in a small

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and poorly furnished room of a house in one of the back streets of Allerton, although it was not likely to take precisely the same form in each case, since they were as dissimilar in disposition as in appearance. Amy, the elder of the two, with her oval face, delicately cut lips, and fair hair and skin, might have served as a model for the Madonnas of Raphael's early style; while Helen, with an olive-brown complexion, a low and broad forehead, shaded by heavy masses of dark hair, not too smoothly braided, and with a figure angular and unformed, as it is apt to be at the age of sixteen, could only claim possibilities of beauty which were as yet undeveloped. Both girls were busily at work, Helen stitching seams in the sewing-machine, while Amy applied herself to the discouraging task of mending the finger-tops of a well-worn pair of kid gloves; and when all was done she dipped a feather in ink, and smeared it over the trace of stitches.

"There!" she said, with a sigh which expressed as much discontent as satisfaction; "that wearisome business is done; and when I have worn the gloves for one Sunday, I suppose that it will be all to do again."

Helen looked up, stopping the click of the machine for a moment to reply: "I hope that the game is worth the candle, Amy. I met Dennis in the street yesterday, who was looking forward as usual to Sunday afternoon, but I doubt whether he would dis-

cover whether your hands were gloved in kid or cotton."

"He may not have the opportunity of discovering," said Amy, hastily; "he assumes too much when he takes it for granted that we shall walk together, as if I were a maid-servant on her Sunday out—except, indeed, that a maid-servant is much better dressed."

"How you vex your soul on the subject of dress," rejoined Helen; "my theory that shabbiness is a badge of gentility is so very convenient and reassuring, and Dennis has the profoundest contempt for what he calls the accidents of life."

"You always quote Dennis O'Brien's opinions as a law against which there is no appeal," said Amy, with increasing annoyance. "I claim the right to think and act for myself. You are altogether mistaken if you imagine that I have given him the right to dictate to me."

"I do not presume to understand your relations," said Helen, setting her machine at work again with an energy which gave her the advantage of the last word. "I very much doubt whether you understand them yourself, but perhaps Dennis is more clear-sighted."

"I wonder when mamma's interview with Uncle Richard will come to an end," said Amy, when the next pause in Helen's work took place. "I shall be so glad to escape from the noise of the machine."

"The noise will be less aggravating if you work it yourself," said Helen. "If you will finish this skirt

for me, I can go and make tea. Mother is always exhausted by Uncle Richard's visits, and the appearance of tea may have a soothing effect, and will also remind him that his visit has run to length."

"I will make tea and take it in myself," said Amy. "Your hair is rough, and you have no cuffs on, and Sarah is still less presentable on a Saturday afternoon."

Although Helen might have appreciated some respite from her work, she acquiesced in this division of labour, and Amy repaired to the kitchen, where she prepared the tea-tray with the neatness and refinement which she so well understood, and caused Sarah, the general servant, to carry it upstairs for her, dismissing her again to the lower regions before she opened the door of the room in which Mrs. Mertoun sat with her wealthy brother-in-law.

Amy's colour was just heightened by the exertion, and her drooping eyelids were prettily expressive of a desire to deprecate her intrusion; but her entrance was evidently not unwelcome to her uncle, whose rugged features were softened by a smile as he addressed her. "We have been talking of you, Amy, and I do not know whether you or the tea is most welcome. Talking is dry work, when people do not agree."

"I hope that we shall agree," said Mrs. Mertoun, with nervous timidity of manner; "the suggestion has taken me by surprise, and I could not accept it without talking the matter over with Henry."

"And why with Henry, a lad of twenty-one, hardly two years older than Amy herself, who has the best right to be consulted?"

"He is but young, certainly," said Mrs. Mertoun; "but he is the bread-winner of the family, and so good and steady, that I cannot help putting him in my dear husband's place."

"Do you wish me to go away, mamma?" said Amy, with so evident an inclination to linger that her mother wanted resolution to dismiss her. She took up a piece of fancy work, and while her fingers were busily employed, she fixed her eyes anxiously on her uncle, and said, "How is Eva, Uncle Richard?"

"She is well; that is—no, she is far from well—languid and full of fancies; and the doctors tell me to humour her, as if I were not at all times ready to do it. The reigning whim now is that she leads too lonely a life, and that if you were her companion, she should never be out of spirits. What should you think of it? Your mother would have one mouth less to feed, and indeed would be saved expenses in other ways, for of course I should give you an allowance."

"If dear mamma can spare me, I should be very happy at Leasowes," said Amy. It was prettily said, and yet the mother felt as if the honest bluffness with which Helen might have disclaimed the possibility of leaving her home would have been more grateful to her.

"Of course she can spare you," said Mr. Mertoun:

"she would have to do without you if you made a good marriage, of which by the by there is more chance at Leasowes than here. However, I am not going to press as if the favour were all on your side. I can only say that most girls would jump at such an offer."

"And Amy, as you see, is not unwilling to accept it," said Mrs. Mertoun. "You must not think that I take an unreasonable time for consideration, if I defer my final answer for a day. I will write by to-morrow's post."

"And if the answer is such as I have a right to expect, I will send the carriage for Amy early in next week. Eva dislikes any delay when she has set her heart on a thing, and I left her planning the arrangements for Amy's room, which, she says, must be next to her own."

"Give Eva my very best love," said Amy; and though Mr. Mertoun protested with a contemptuous grunt that he was never meant to be the bearer of affectionate messages, he was unlikely to forget anything which might afford a moment's pleasure to his delicate and fanciful child.

Amy anxiously awaited her mother's decision when Mr. Mertoun was gone, but, as she knew by experience, the necessity for action was ever retarded by a nervous sense of responsibility. Mrs. Mertoun was endowed with the ivy-like nature which clings with tenacity to the first object that offers a firm support, and although it was twelve years since her hus-

band had closed a life of reckless improvidence in disgrace and ruin, she still deferred to his opinions real or imaginary, and hesitated to take any step of which he might have disapproved. Since Henry had attained to manhood, his strong sense was allowed to share the empire of his dead father, but he had imbibed many of the prejudices which had led to estrangement between the two branches of the Mertoun family, and approved of her resolution to accept no pecuniary aid at the hands of the man whom she held to be responsible for his brother's ruin. Such aid had indeed been indirectly given, for when Henry declined the proposal that he should enter his uncle's office at Bixley, Richard Mertoun's interest procured for him a clerkship in the County Bank at Allerton.

Mrs. Mertoun was a graceful, lady-like woman, with great remains of beauty; and indeed it was an article of the family creed that few younger women could vie with her in personal attractions. Richard Mertoun disliked her as heartily as near connections, who do not happen to be congenial, are prone to dislike each other; but for the sake of his nephews and nieces he had always refused to quarrel with her. He came to Allerton at stated intervals, and the younger members of the family sometimes went to Leasowes, from which Henry and Helen were too apt to return with prejudices confirmed against their rich relations, while Amy never missed the opportunity of cementing that friendship with Eva which now prompted a desire to secure her as a constant inmate.

"I must say that Uncle Richard is right," said Amy, when she had waited in vain for her mother to enter on the subject: "it is unnecessary to appeal to Henry unless you do it to shelter your own dislike to the scheme. To me it seems the happiest escape from dependence, for I have looked forward to becoming a governess or companion now that Helen is old enough to be useful."

"Dependence on a near relation may be more galling than the same position among strangers," replied Mrs. Mertoun.

"I do not think so, mamma. Uncle Richard is essentially kind to me, even when his manner is rough; and you, who have scarcely seen Eva, can hardly imagine her gentle caressing ways. I am sure that I should be very happy at Leasowes."

"Happier than at home, Amy?"

"We should only be ten miles apart," said Amy, evading a more direct reply: "we might often meet, and I should be no longer a burden upon Henry."

"There is another reason why I hesitated to accept your uncle's offer," said Mrs. Mertoun. "I fancied that you would wish to consult Dennis O'Brien."

"To consult him?" repeated Amy, with rising colour: "indeed, mamma, you altogether misconstrue our relations. I deny that he has either the right or the inclination to control my actions. It would be affectation to deny that he admires me, and any warmer feeling has grown insensibly out of our boy and girl friendship; but he knows as well as I do that

a formal engagement would be hopeless and absurd; and it may be for his happiness that we should have fewer opportunities of meeting."

"Possibly; and it is evident that yours will not be affected by the separation."

"Indeed, mamma, I think it will be best for both," said Amy, candidly: "the consciousness that the eyes of Allerton are upon us, drawing inferences which the facts do not justify, destroys any pleasure in meeting him."

"In such a case it may be better to part," said Mrs. Mertoun; "but you must also make up your mind to see little of us all. There is no cordiality between Henry and his uncle, and he never willingly goes to Leasowes."

"I shall try to break down the barrier," said Amy; "and at all events I shall be able to come here, and to see more of you all than if I were a governess, perhaps a hundred miles away. You need not tell me that it is hard to be dependent, but surely it is still harder to live on here from week to week and year to year with little occupation and no interest in life, except that of a round of sordid economies. You may think it despicable; Helen I know despises me for hankering after material comforts; but it seems to me that some command of money is the sum of human happiness."

Mrs. Mertoun looked doubtful and distressed, but as Helen came in to condole with her mother on the length of her uncle Richard's visit, the subject was

allowed to drop; nor was it mentioned again until late in the evening, when the two girls had retired for the night. Mrs. Mertoun was left alone with her son Henry, and she knew how to interpret the pleading tenderness with which Amy bade her good night, so that she began, mother like, to urge the arguments in favour of accepting Richard Mertoun's proposal, which she had been at some pains to combat when it was first made.

Henry Mertoun, whose features were marked by the thoughtful and mature gravity which is acquired by those on whom the burden of life has fallen early, listened attentively until the story was told. "I hardly like the idea," he said at last; "you know that I did not like it for myself, and it was with your full concurrence that I refused a similar offer. But the position may suit Amy, who never seems quite congenial with the family atmosphere."

"Poor child!" said Mrs. Mertoun; "she is old enough to remember when the atmosphere was very different. She was her father's darling, and he thought that nothing was too good for her."

"Twelve years of penury might efface the childish memory of those luxurious days, mother. But if the prospect of reviving them in Uncle Richard's grand house will make amends for the loss of home sympathy, she is welcome to go."

"It is only an experiment, and, if it fails, she can but come back again," said Mrs. Mertoun.

"Not if she is to come back more fastidious and

intolerant of our shifts of poverty than when she went: I do not think that would be well. Let it be clearly understood that if she casts in her lot with our rich relations, she must not complain of crumpled rose-leaves. She must not barter her birthright for a mess of pottage, and then expect the blessing of the first-born."

Mrs. Mertoun looked wistfully at her son as she replied, "If you compare Amy to Esau, Henry, the tone of your speech makes me think of Ishmael. Your hand is against every man."

"Was it not you who taught me to dislike and mistrust my Uncle Richard?" said Henry.

"It seems time to forget the old grudge," said Mrs. Mertoun. "If your Uncle Richard is conscious that he wronged your father, and wishes to make amends to his children, I too will try to forget the past. And I may tell Amy that you consent to her going?"

"If my consent is necessary. We shall miss her in many ways; and, as Helen said one day, when we were discussing the possibility of her marriage to O'Brien, 'How horribly ungenteel you and I must become when Amy's refining presence is withdrawn.'"

Thus the family consent was given to Amy's migration to her uncle's house; but she knew, in spite of her assertion to the contrary, that the matter could not be considered as settled until Dennis O'Brien had been taken into her confidence.

CHAPTER II.

The Metamorphosis.

HENRY MERTOUN and Dennis O'Brien were fellow-clerks at the county bank, and their intimacy dated from the day of Henry's first appearance there, some two years before. O'Brien, two years his senior, and already accustomed to the drudgery of the office, was kind to the shy, sensitive lad, and the friendship between them ripened as quickly as if they had been a pair of lovers. Their leisure hours, as well as those devoted to work, were spent together; and since O'Brien lived alone in lodgings, it was natural that he should spend much of his time with the Mertoun household. He was soon at home with them all, the object of Mrs. Mertoun's maternal solicitude, and learning to address the girls by their Christian names, while he claimed their services in mounting his entomological or botanical specimens as freely as if they had been his sisters.

Dennis was of Irish extraction, as his name denoted, and possessed many of the characteristics of his race. He was eager and enthusiastic, indoctrinating his associates with sentiments which were always emphatically underlined, and exacting unbounded sympathy in all his interests and pursuits.. It need scarcely be added that when he divided the human race into two broadly defined classes of angels and demons

Henry Mertoun's beautiful sister did not rank among the demons.

There was, as Amy had said, no formal engagement between them, for how were two young people even to think of marriage without any more ample provision than the salary of a junior clerk? But in the sweet summer twilight of May evenings, when they had listened to the singing of nightingales, and on balmy days in March as they wandered through the lanes together, plucked white violets from the banks, Amy's hand had been pressed to her lover's heart, and more soft and tender sayings had been exchanged between them than she now cared to remember. Of late, indeed, the joy of such idyllic pleasures had been marred, and Amy had drawn back, gently but resolutely, from the freedom of their intercourse. They no longer walked together, unless Henry or Helen were willing to accompany them, and Amy's smiles were rarer on the evenings which Dennis spent at their house than at other times. His courtship became more stormy as she grew more cautious, and she said, not without truth, that he was unreasonable and exacting. Still he went and came, and hoped that the cloud would pass away, while Amy felt that the prospect of release from a situation of which she was weary was not her least potent motive for leaving her mother's house.

The Sunday dinner was scarcely over when Dennis O'Brien's figure flitted past the window, and in another moment he was in the entrance passage, waiting

for no response to his knock to enter the parlour. "It is a perfect spring day," he said; "all the insects must be abroad, and we ought to make great discoveries on the heath. I hoped to find you ready, Amy."

"Helen doubts about going," replied Amy.

"I was not speaking to Helen," said Dennis, with a clouded brow; "you promised to walk to Durdham Copse with me on the first fine Sunday."

"Henry has made his own plans for the afternoon," observed Helen, "and I object to being a bad third."

"You had better go, Helen; you were scarcely out of the house last week, and you ought to have a walk," said Mrs. Mertoun.

"Then I must make Dick sacrifice himself," said Helen, seizing her younger brother by the ear. "Dick, I appeal to you as a man and a brother to afford me the honour of your company."

"I have got to grind my Greek Testament," said Dick, doggedly, and suppressing the more powerful attraction of spending a lawless afternoon in bird's-nesting with his schoolfellows.

"We will grind it together when we sit down to rest in the copse," said Helen.

"I am not going to let you carry the lexicon through the streets on Sunday afternoon," rejoined Dick, loftily. His imagination was not lively enough to conceive the possibility of carrying it himself.

"Most true, you slave to propriety; but is not Dennis as infallible an authority as the lexicon itself,

and we can appeal to him in any difficulty. Be obliging for once, and you may be rewarded by falling heir to a duplicate specimen of beetle or butterfly. You know Dennis's luck and skill as a collector."

The prospect of being shoved through his task at the least possible expense of mental labour prevailed with Dick, when it was coupled with this bait, and he graciously consented to accompany his sisters. Amy had awaited his decision with an air of placid indifference, but she and Helen lost no time in preparing for the walk, and since Dick was also dismissed to brush his jacket, Dennis was left alone with Mrs. Mertoun. He instantly turned upon her with a sort of bridled impatience.

"Is it by your orders, Mrs. Mertoun, that Amy refuses to walk with me?"

"She has not refused, Dennis. I have never spoken to her on the subject, but I do not find fault with the instinct which leads her to shun the inference which our gossiping neighbours are so ready to draw."

"An inference in which I glory," replied Dennis; "are we not all in all to each other? It is only for the few short hours of the week which I spend in Amy's company, that I can be said in any true sense to live: at other times I barely exist."

Mrs. Mertoun replied by a constrained smile. O'Brien had never until now spoken out his heart so plainly, and before she had summoned resolution to daunt his enthusiasm by a single word of discouragement, the two girls re-entered the room, and the

opportunity was lost. Helen understood her duties as a chaperon, and they walked side by side through the quiet streets of Allerton; but as soon as they turned into the grass fields which led to Durdham Copse, she and Dick fell behind, and the lovers, if lovers they were to be, knew that their colloquy was to be undisturbed. Dennis made a motion to draw Amy's hand within his arm, and when she demurred, he said pleadingly, "For this one afternoon, Amy, if never again."

Amy blushed, while she suffered the hand which trembled a little to rest lightly on his grasp, and she asked herself whether Henry or her mother had prepared him for the communication which she had to make.

"I must have startled your mother just now," resumed Dennis, who was himself too much agitated to observe her discomposure. "If you had been out of the room for a moment longer, I should have gone headlong into a matter which I was resolved that you should be the first to know. I am not ungrateful to a position to which I owe my acquaintance with Henry and Henry's sister, but you know how I have always disliked the bank drudgery, and I am perhaps absurdly elated at the prospect of being transferred to a more congenial atmosphere. Our common interest in beetles has brought me into friendly relations with Mr. Burdon, one of the bank managers, and I had the kindest letter from him last night, telling me that he was authorized by the other trustees to offer me the curatorship of

the museum at Bixley. The immediate rise in salary is not great, but the start it gives me in the only career for which I am fitted would be worth a sacrifice of income. I shall be brought into communication with scientific men, many of whom have achieved distinction from equally obscure beginnings, and I need not now despair of attaining a position worthy even of you, Amy." He paused, chilled by her silence, and looked anxiously into her face. Amy was, in fact, too much absorbed in the thought of her own new career to be greatly affected by the intelligence, except from one point of view.

"The museum at Bixley?" she repeated. "How strange that you should be going there just now! My Uncle Richard's house is close to Bixley, and it was decided yesterday that I should go to live with him, as companion to his only daughter."

"The Fates have ordained that we should not be separated," said Dennis, triumphantly; but Amy was able to put a different interpretation on the facts.

"You do not know Uncle Richard, Dennis. He is a strange, cold man, with one soft place in his heart for his only child, and I am to be her slave and companion. The position will be a difficult one, and since our poverty has always been an offence in his eyes, I shall not venture to invite my acquaintance to his house."

"True, your acquaintance," repeated Dennis, with some bitterness. "I should decline to enter his doors

if I am to be designated by so cold a term. But what if I come as your affianced lover?"

"It is better that we should understand each other," said Amy; and the words were spoken with studied calmness even while the paleness of her lips betrayed the greatness of the effort. "I have wished for an opportunity to declare my conviction that our present relations cannot continue. As boy and girl we have been happy together with no thought for the future, but now that we have each to make a real start in life, we must be fettered by no engagement."

"I understand," said Dennis, fixing his eyes on Amy with an expression of indignant scorn before which she quailed; "we are to exercise the right of free choice in our separate spheres." He paused for a reply, but Amy made no attempt to contradict the interpretation he had put upon her words. "And this," he went on with increasing vehemence, "this is the woman I have loved—with no thought of the future, I think you said—I have lived only for the hope of calling you my own, and of providing a shrine fit for the idol of my fancy."

"I have spoken as much for your sake as for mine, Dennis."

"You are considerate indeed," replied O'Brien with cold irony, and Amy felt the impossibility of continuing the conversation. She dropped his arm, and waited for her brother and sister to come up with them.

"Have you found a specimen?" cried Dick, running forward; "remember that you promised me the first Painted Lady of the season."

"This is not *Vanessa Cardui*, but a new variety," replied Dennis; "a painted lady which has just left the chrysalis and intends to soar above us earth worms."

"Where is it? Let me see; have you let it go?" said Dick, surveying O'Brien's empty palm with a puzzled air.

"I have let it go," repeated O'Brien quietly. Amy declared herself to be too tired to walk to Durdham Copse, and asked Helen to return home with her; nor has history recorded that the other two were successful in their entomological researches.

CHAPTER III.

The Mess of Pottage.

EARLY in the following week Mr. Mertoun's carriage was sent to Allerton for his niece. Eva, like the petted child she had always been, was eager to obtain possession of the toy she had coveted, and since the family finances allowed of no unnecessary outlay, Amy's preparations were soon made. The parting was over, and she leaned back in the carriage with a delightful sense of luxurious ease. As she was whirled past the Bank, she fancied that she could distinguish the head of Dennis O'Brien above the wire-

blind, as he leaned over his desk, but such recognition scarcely dashed her pleasure. The cold estrangement with which they had parted seemed to her the only possible solution of the difficulties which beset her path: if he had been importunate in his constancy, or passionate in upbraiding her fickleness, their chance encounters in the streets of Bixley must have been a source of embarrassment and annoyance, but as things were, she dismissed him from her mind with the reflection that when his unreasonable anger had subsided he would thank her for what she had done, and they might once more be friends.

In order to reach Leasowes, it was necessary to pass through the busy commercial town of Bixley, the town in which Richard Mertoun had amassed his fortune, and in which he owned a coal and timber wharf and some other thriving concerns. The place seemed like a metropolis to Amy, coming fresh from sleepy Allerton, and she noted the stir of life with interest, and acknowledged the numerous marks of respect paid to Mr. Mertoun's carriage with peculiar satisfaction. Another mile's drive brought her to Leasowes, a square substantial house, with that air of being made to order which is apt to pervade the domain of a self-made man of wealth. The trim pleasure grounds, with their rare shrubs and brilliant flowerbeds, the splendid conservatories, and the luxurious fittings of the house, were the pride of Bixley and an object of condescending admiration when presented to the notice of the more aristocratic county society.

Amy was abashed by the appearance of the two tall servants who came to the door to usher herself and her poor little portmanteau into the hall, but her position seemed to be assured by the affectionate warmth of Eva's greeting. "My dearest Amy! what a long dull drive you must have had! I wished so much to go in the carriage, but papa said that it would be too much for me. Bring tea this instant, John; or will you have lunch? We do not dine till seven, and it is only half-past three."

"I want nothing now; I will have a cup of tea at your usual time," said Amy.

"Bring tea at once," repeated Eva with decision; "is not my time yours? Come to my morning-room, where we can be as lazy and as comfortable as we please. I am not at home to any one this afternoon, John," she added as they left the hall; and Amy felt that she was already installed as a dear and honoured inmate, not as the poor dependant on her uncle's bounty.

It was easy to see how the conditions of intimacy were to be fulfilled by the two cousins. Eva's overflowing affection had hitherto lacked an object on which to expend itself, for although her father worshipped her after his fashion, her caressing kitten-like ways could meet with little response from a man absorbed in business cares, sparing of his words, and as rugged in nature as in feature. As Eva outgrew her childish passion for dolls, she had recourse to live creatures; but the rarest of birds, the most unsightly of pugs, had

failed to satisfy the cravings of her heart, and since the day, now nearly two years ago, when she first observed her cousin's budding beauty, she had been the object of her unswerving admiration. Another little episode, hereafter to be mentioned, had only increased her sense of loneliness, and her conviction that her cousin's stronger nature might supply the strength and sympathy to which she might cling; and when the proposal that Amy should come to Leasowes was accepted, she felt that the obligation was all on her side.

There was no family likeness between the cousins. Eva was short and slightly made, with great vivacity of movement, a colourless skin, and large, liquid eyes, which seemed to bespeak a soul too large for its fragile sheath. Amy, with her statuesque grace, perfectly modelled figure, and clear, porcelain complexion, reminded those who saw her of a figure in Dresden china: she was as beautiful, and almost as cold.

"You must have had a trying day," said Eva, caressing Amy's plump, white hand, "saying good-bye to all at home. Can Aunt Anne forgive me for wiling you away?"

"She has Helen," said Amy, not without an uneasy consciousness that Helen's niche in the family would be less easily filled.

"True, she has Helen, but—may I say it?—that is not precisely the same thing. I have not seen Helen very often, and I think there is something antipathetic between us which I daresay we might get

over if we were more together. With you it is altogether different, although I remember that when you settled at Allerton two years ago, and papa said that we must ask you over, I made rather a grievance of it. I loved you when you came, and I have loved you ever since." Further expression of her eager affection was checked by the appearance of the footman with the tea-tray, and Eva presently dismissed him with a packet of notes which were to be delivered that afternoon.

"Invitations to a dinner-party," she explained to her cousin. "I would not send them out until you had actually arrived. These great formal entertainments have always been a fatigue and oppression to me, but now that you are here to share the responsibility and talk over the guests with me, I fancy that I shall almost enjoy them."

"You take my breath away," said Amy. "I have no dress in which to appear at a regular dinner party. You know our straits of poverty well enough to excuse my shabby dress when we are alone together; and by and by, if Uncle Richard fulfils his vague promise of giving me an allowance, I will try not to bring discredit on you. Meanwhile I must remain in the background."

"No, indeed, Amy. I have not transplanted you from Allerton that you may live in obscurity. I am glad that papa's arrangements were vague, for then I may take my own measures to give them definite shape. No outlay pleases him so well as the money

I spend at the Bixley shops, and we will go in the town to-morrow to order what is necessary—what I think necessary for you. When you have got your outfit, papa may please himself about your allowance."

Amy faintly disclaimed the possibility of availing herself of such a munificent offer, but her scruples were easily overruled, and the dolls of Eva's childhood had not submitted with more smiling complacency to be decked out in the silk and satin costumes which her lively fancy had devised for them.

Amy did not see her uncle until she came downstairs, dressed for dinner in the simple white dress which she no longer thought it necessary to husband for more important occasions. Eva's gay spirits and eager assurances that Amy was the gentlest, loveliest, and most loveable of human beings, procured for her a cordial reception from Mr. Mertoun; he kissed her cheek, and hoped that she would be happy in her new home, since he was as ready to welcome another daughter as Eva was to adopt her as a sister. Amy could scarcely believe that this was the same Uncle Richard whose infrequent visits to the little house at Allerton were apt to bring constraint and gloom, and to cloud her mother's face with added care.

This feeling of surprise and gratitude was partly expressed by Amy when the hour of bed-time came, and the two girls sat together over the bright wood fire which Eva's solicitude for her comfort had caused

to be kindled in her room. It was an unnecessary luxury on that mild May evening, and they left the window open that they might enjoy the singing of the nightingales. "How kind Uncle Richard was to me! it was almost as if I had found my own dear father again," said Amy; and the words were spoken out of the fulness of her heart.

"I fancy that he was thinking of Uncle Henry to-night," said Eva, thoughtfully. "I know that the estrangement often weighs upon his mind."

"Do tell me about it, Eva; my mother will never go into details. I know of course the one terrible fact that distress and ruin followed, or perhaps caused my father's death, but I have never been able to understand how Uncle Richard was connected with our misfortunes, nor why mamma has been so unwilling to be under any obligation to him."

"Papa often speaks of it," replied Eva; "he thinks Aunt Anne unreasonable, but of course it is natural that she should still see the cause of quarrel with Uncle Henry's eyes. Our grandfather was a country surgeon in small practice, and his two sons had both to make their way in the world. Your father, who was the eldest, went into the surgery for a time, but he did not take to it, and then he was articled to an architect, and that did not do either. There was no money forthcoming to put papa out in the world, nor to give him a tolerable education, and he was glad to take a sort of errand-boy's place in Edgar's coal and timber-yard. He worked his way up into the office

by steady application, and when he had been ten years a clerk, he married his master's daughter, and old Mr. Edgar, who died soon afterwards, left everything to him when he died. Still papa says, and I think that he has a right to be proud of it, that he owes all his success in life to honest hard work, and not to any stroke of good luck. As soon as he was his own master, he tried to help Uncle Henry, who had never settled to anything, and was living on Aunt Anne's small portion. Papa made him manager of the coal-yard, with a sort of understanding that he should have a share in the business, but they could not get on together. There may have been faults on both sides, but he says that Uncle Henry was reckless and improvident, and would not keep accounts. At last there was a regular quarrel, and papa gave him money—5,000*l.* I believe it was—on condition that he should leave Bixley. Uncle Henry was very angry, and said that his brother had broken faith with him; however, he took the money and went away."

"I can just remember leaving Bixley," said Amy. "I think I was five years old. We went to a villa at Twickenham, and lived in what seemed great luxury and splendour, when I contrast it with these later years."

"It only lasted for two years," replied Eva. "Papa does not know how the money went, whether in speculation, or if he only lived upon his capital. At the end of that time Uncle Henry began to write to him for help—almost threatening letters he said they were

—opening up the old question of the partnership. Papa took no notice for some time, and at last returned all the letters in a blank envelope. He blames himself for this now, since it may have driven Uncle Henry to desperation. Two days afterwards, he received a letter to tell him of his sudden death, and summoning him to attend the inquest."

"I remember his coming to Twickenham," said Amy, shivering; "there was an execution in the house and men coming in to remove the body for the inquest. Mamma was almost beside herself with the shock of his death and the knowledge of our certain ruin, and we children were huddled together, and hunted from room to room. People talk of the happiness of youth, but I think that from that day to this our lives have been a protracted misery."

"We ought not to have revived these sad memories," said Eva, "only I wished you to know how it was with papa, that you might not begin with a prejudice against him. Aunt Anne and Henry have refused his help in so many ways, that he knows that they still nourish the old bitterness."

"I know it; I always thought that Henry was wrong-headed to refuse the offer of coming into his office, and Henry was angry with me for coming here, Eva."

"I must be doubly dear to you if you have given up Henry for my sake," said Eva, with a tender embrace. "Now let us talk of something else, or you will be haunted by bad dreams in your first night at home. Let me see your hair, your beautiful golden

hair, which wound its coils around my heart on the first day I ever saw you."

"Silly child!" said Amy smiling, and not unwilling to let down the golden shower of glossy hair, soft and fine as floss silk, which rippled over her shoulders, and far below her waist. Eva toyed and trifled with its untold wealth, until smiles had chased every cloud from Amy's fair face, and her dreams that night were not of the haunting past, but of a bright future opening before her.

CHAPTER IV.

"Fresh Fields and Pastures New."

THE two girls spent a long morning among the Bixley shops, and returned to a late luncheon, and to talk over purchases which had opened to Amy a delightful vista of the costumes appropriate to every variety of social gathering which were to take the place of the thin and much-enduring silk dress that was familiar to all the inhabitants of Allerton. They were still in the dining-room when Eva was informed of the arrival of a visitor.

"Leave the parcels here; John will tell Julia to take them to your room," said Eva, as Amy was about to retreat upstairs. "I see a good deal of Lady Cecilia Wray, and should like you to know her; and besides if I introduce you to her now, there will be one stranger less at our dinner-party, for she is to be one

of the guests. Never mind about your hair; it is much smoother than mine." And Eva cut short further remonstrance by slipping her hand within her cousin's arm, as she opened the door into the drawing-room.

Lady Cecilia Wray, a fair full-blown lady of forty or thereabouts, greeted Eva with the utmost effusion. "My dear Eva! I am ashamed to call so early, but I wished to catch you before you went out. Of course you know that Mr. Wray and I are charmed to accept your invitation to dinner, and I venture to ask whether your table is full, or if we may bring Lord Alan Rae. You remember my nephew, who spent six weeks with us last summer; he is coming on Tuesday, and I should not like to leave him on the very first evening."

"I am sure that it will give papa great pleasure to see Lord Alan Rae," said Eva, as soon as Lady Cecilia's profuse explanations admitted of a reply, "now I want to introduce another Miss Mertoun to you—my cousin Amy, who has come to live with me."

Lady Cecilia received Amy with all politeness, but her overflowing cordiality was still reserved for Eva. "Any addition to our little circle is welcome, and I hope my dear Eva, that you will say the same as far as my nephew is concerned, or have you quite forgotten Alan?"

"I have not forgotten him," said Eva, with a slight degree of agitation which did not escape her cousin's

notice; "I did not know that he was expected at the Hollies."

"He has been at home all the winter," said Lady Cecilia; "a sad home it is for him, poor fellow, now that my brother's health is failing, and poor Macrae, the eldest son, is in a melancholy state. His head was affected by some accident he had as a boy, and I fear that his mind is incurably weakened. Lady Raeburn writes that Alan's happy temper has cheered them all, but they feel that he really needs some relaxation, and now that he is coming south, I daresay that he will stay until the grouse shooting begins. I should like to show you Alan's letter, but I am afraid that I have left it at home. He says that it will give him such pleasure to renew his acquaintance with our neighbours here, since he has the happiest recollection of last summer's visit."

"What a strange woman to go into all these family details," remarked Amy, when Lady Cecilia had taken leave.

"It is Lady Cecilia's way," replied Eva: "and our plebeian natures are rather gratified by such condescending frankness. She imagines that the eyes of all the world are fixed on the noble house of Rae, and she seldom goes through an evening without remarking that she has not forfeited her maiden name, although, as she belongs to one of the oldest Scotch families, and her husband is only a Berkshire squire, it is merely a coincidence in sound."

"She seems to be very fond of you, Eva."

"Rather too fond," rejoined Eva, with a little *moue* expressive of dissatisfaction: "she took me up vehemently when I came out a year ago, and I am always expecting her to let me down again with a run; but as she is the great lady of Bixley and the neighbourhood, Papa is flattered, and it has been impossible to avoid the intimacy. She is really good-natured, and amusing for a limited time."

"And what is Lord Alan like?"

"How shall I tell you? He is not like his aunt, nor like people in general. You will see him on Tuesday, and may judge for yourself, and after all I know him very slightly." But the blush which qualified this assertion was significant to Amy's eyes.

It appeared that even in a house of which the machinery was as well oiled as that of Leasowes, the giving of dinner-parties was attended by considerable anxiety and trouble. Eva's finer instincts recoiled from any ostentation of wealth, but she was obliged to defer to her father's will on this point, and to submit to him the *menu* of the dinner, with all its details of lighting and service, to satisfy him that all was arranged on one harmonious scale of costly splendour.

"I think there was a Roman Emperor who chose to dine on nightingales' tongues," said Eva, as she sate down to her writing-table to order some delicacy from Covent Garden which was not yet in season: "I consider that sort of thing barbaric and out of taste, and it vexes me that Papa does not see it in the same light. If it is necessary to attract fine people by a

display of expensive luxuries, in which they would not dream of indulging in their own houses, they had better not come at all. When I lunch with Lady Cecilia, she does not apologise for sitting down to two or three lukewarm slices off the servants' joint, but, if she comes here, Papa thinks that three or four entrées at a guinea each are indispensable."

Amy assented softly, not caring to provoke an argument, but in her heart she was disposed to think that such palpable proofs of Mr. Mertoun's great wealth were not deserving of Eva's indignant protest.

The important evening arrived, and it seemed doubly important to Amy, since she was conscious of being perfectly well dressed for the first time in her life. The Wray party was not the first to arrive, and since Amy was already engaged in conversation with Sir John Hawthorne, who was to take her in to dinner, they were seated at the table before she had leisure to make her observations. Lord Alan had taken Eva down and was now conversing with her, but without much animation. He was a tall, fair young man, as fair as Dennis O'Brien, but, as Amy had no hesitation in admitting, he was far more regularly handsome, although there was an unsettled, vacillating expression in his eyes, which might be accounted a defect. Lady Cecilia had taken entire possession of Mr. Mertoun, and he listened with a certain grim complacency to her extravagant commendation of everything which came under her notice, from the *pâtés aux homards* to the blaze of white azalea which filled the conser-

vatory at the lower end of the room. "And that *épergne!* I am sure that I trace Eva's dainty hand in its exquisite arrangement."

"No," said Mr. Mertoun, "I think that my niece must take credit for that. Is it not so, Amy?"

"I helped Eva a little: she seemed tired this afternoon," said Amy.

"She looks pale," remarked Lady Cecilia, glancing down the room. "I do not say ill, for that transparent pallor becomes her. But you must take care of her, Mr. Mertoun."

"The advice is scarcely needed, Lady Cecilia; since she was an hour old she has been my first thought in the morning, and my last at night. Perhaps I have been over-anxious, and have fostered her natural delicacy."

"Nothing is more deceptive than the appearance of delicacy," observed Lady Cecilia; "people tell me that I am the picture of health, and yet I scarcely know what it is to feel really well. You must not be *too* anxious about dear Eva, Mr. Mertoun; let her have plenty of fresh air and amusement, avoiding excitement and late hours. I want her to come over and spend a long day at the Hollies,—Eva and Miss Amy Mertoun," she added with a polite afterthought; "do say that you can spare them."

"Settle it with Eva," said Mr. Mertoun, "I am always out between breakfast and dinner, and the girls can please themselves."

Sir John here engaged Amy's attention, and the

rest of the dialogue was lost to her. Amy was conscious that she contributed little to the general entertainment, for her secluded life had prevented her from acquiring the ease of good society, and Sir John's well-chosen topics languished and died, in spite of his unremitting efforts to prolong their existence. Amy felt discouraged and ashamed of her own stupidity, and had yet to learn that even dulness may be forgiven in a perfectly beautiful woman. It was a knowledge which she acquired a little later.

There were other lady guests, but Lady Cecilia continued to be the central figure when they adjourned to the drawing-room. Eva sought in vain to distribute her attentions, for Lady Cecilia was resolved to talk to her, and to her only, and the rest of the party sat round to listen and be edified. "My dear little hostess," she said, "I must take a lesson from you in the art of dinner-giving. The only alloy to my pleasure in coming here to-night is the prospect of hearing Mr. Wray's critical remarks on our homely fare and inferior appointments. I find it impossible to get a really good cook to stay with us in the country, but your *chef de cuisine* is worth a king's ransom. And the blaze of colour in your conservatory surpasses anything I have seen at this time of year."

"You should reserve your compliments for Papa," said Eva, "such things are in his department, and I am only the little lay figure whom it pleases him to set up at the head of his household."

"Even as a lay figure you excel," said Lady Cecilia: "considering the absurd fashions which are now in vogue, it requires the courage of an artistic taste to dress your hair in that simple and becoming manner."

This last and more direct attack was too much for Eva's endurance. "Do please, Lady Cecilia," she said in a low voice, "leave my poor little person alone, and help me to bridge over this dull interval. Do you think that I may play something?"

Lady Cecilia first applauded the suggestion, and then the performance, and Eva gained so far by her move to the piano, that her irrepressible friend turned to Lady Hawthorne, and talked of instead of to her. The gentlemen soon came in, and Lord Alan offered to relieve Amy of the task of turning over the leaves of her cousin's music book. She retreated into the recess behind the piano, and was thus a silent listener to the dialogue which followed.

"Play something else, Miss Mertoun," said Lord Alan as Eva struck the last chords of a passage which she had played with considerable taste and execution, "something noisy, under cover of which we can talk."

"Will this suit you?" said Eva, beginning a fresh movement with a smile and a heightened colour.

"Anything will suit me which does not draw off your attention. Music is a fine thing for promoting conversation; observe the fresh buzz of talk which has begun with your new piece."

"I know; of all social absurdities drawing-room music is the most gratuitously absurd," said Eva.

"Something may be said for it, as for other abuses," replied Lord Alan; "just now, for instance, it serves for a bulwark between us and the company at large. How dull we were at dinner!"

"I was tired, and yet I do not think that the dulness was altogether my fault," said Eva.

"It was altogether mine, or shall I say my Aunt Cecilia's. Her exuberant energies absorb the vital forces of those with whom she comes in contact, leaving my spirit altogether arid; but under cover of your music the sponge is removed, and I am myself again. And how are *you*, Miss Mertoun? Life seems to go on here just as if I had never been away,—is it this summer or last? Try to enlighten my bewildered senses."

"We do not change much in Bixley, Lord Alan. In one respect there is a pleasant change, however; I want to introduce you to my cousin Amy."

The introduction was made, and Lord Alan seemed quite as willing to talk lively nonsense to one cousin as to the other. Amy showed no readiness in reply, but her diffident blushes gave a new charm to her beauty, and, when Lady Cecilia came to declare that she must order the carriage, since Mr. Wray disliked late hours, Eva, who had been playing rather plaintive airs while the other two talked together, was not sorry that the conference broke up. An early day was fixed for the girls to drive over to the Hol-

lies, and when Lord Alan said that he should take care to make no other engagement for that day, the words were spoken to Amy.

"A very successful evening," remarked Mr. Mertoun, who lost no time in lighting the bed-room candle as soon as the last carriage had driven off; "Lady Cecilia is a guest who always ensures enough of talk."

"Enough, or too much," remarked Eva, as she followed her cousin upstairs with lagging steps; "I am so utterly tired, Amy, that I will not come to your room to-night, lest I should be tempted to linger. We can talk over our guests to-morrow." When the morrow came, however, Eva did not seem to be more disposed to be communicative, at least so far as Lord Alan Rae was concerned.

CHAPTER V.

Crumpled Rose-leaves.

Amy had not the pen of a ready writer, and although she wrote to her mother with dutiful regularity, the bold statement that she was very happy, and that Eva and her Uncle Richard were kindness itself, left a good deal to the imagination. Helen declared that she should have made better use of her opportunities, if she had had anything more exciting to record than the number of skirts and mantles which she had stitched in the machine for the local

draper, by whom she was regularly supplied with work, or the scraps of classical learning which she acquired in helping her brother Richard to prepare his school lessons.

"The rank and fashion of Allerton are provided with summer finery," Helen said one morning to her mother: "Mr. Benson (the draper before mentioned) says that he shall give me nothing else to do for a fortnight, when he must begin to think of the autumn fashions. I am going to indulge myself with a morning's work over Mrs. Somerville's physical geography. Did I tell you that Dennis lent me the book before he went away, promising to correct my notes from it, which I am to send by post. This makes me less dismally sure that all chance of my liberal education has departed with him."

"I wish that I could afford to give you the advantages you hanker after," said Mrs. Mertoun.

"You need not wish it, mother," said Helen, brightly: "if I had been set up with the stock-in-trade of an accomplished young lady, I should most likely have been as idle and desultory as my neighbours. Look at Dick, who has been in school for five hours a day since he was eight years old, and the only problem he cares to solve is how to distribute an ounce of thought through a pound of work. All the knowledge which I try to infuse falls off in beautiful round drops, like water off a duck's back, and I do really think that boys are stupider and more fri-

volous than girls, always excepting Dennis O'Brien. I wonder how Dennis is getting on at Bixley."

"We shall hear next week: Henry intends to spend next Sunday with him," said Mrs. Mertoun, and Helen took a lively interest in the intelligence.

"I am glad of that: we shall hear whether Dennis has encountered Amy, and what came of it, and I suppose that Henry will see Amy herself."

"He will call at Leasowes, if his uncle seems to wish it: I am going to write to Amy to-day," said Mrs. Mertoun, who had in fact extorted Henry's unwilling consent to this measure: he said that his visit to Leasowes might be distasteful to Dennis and he disclaimed any desire to gratify his sister at the expense of his friend.

The return of post brought a budget from Leasowes. Richard Mertoun wrote to invite his nephew to join their Sunday dinner, and to bring his friend with him if he liked: Eva enclosed a note for Mrs. Mertoun, entreating her to allow Helen to accompany her brother to Bixley, that she might spend the Sunday with them, and take home a report of Amy's well-being, and there was also a letter from Amy herself to the same effect, which contained a token of sisterly affection in the form of a pair of double-button kid gloves.

"Only look!" said Helen, displaying the gift with a laugh of honest amusement; "this little fact speaks volumes, and I interpret it thus. Amy means to say, Come if you like, but do not bring me to discredit

by coming in thread gloves. If she had sent me the three and sixpence in stamps, she knows that I should have been sorely tempted to spend the money in muffins and sardines, that Dick might invite a friend to tea on Saturday evening."

Even while Helen disclaimed the possibility of rising to the proper level of Leasowes gentility, it was evident that the prospect of such a break in her monotonous life was attractive, and the motive urged by Eva of bringing back a report of Amy weighed with Mrs. Mertoun. "It is of no use trusting to Henry's account of her," she said, "a man never sees the things which we really care to know."

"Besides," added Henry, "I shall not have much time to bestow on such researches. My visit is to Dennis, and I certainly shall not desert him to dine at Leasowes."

"You will call there, however," said Mrs. Mertoun.

"Oh yes, I will call, and I think it is quite right that Helen should go there. Eva writes a nice, affectionate note, and, since there is no excuse to make, we ought not to vex her by declining the invitation."

Thus then the matter was arranged, and on the following Saturday the brother and sister set out for Bixley. Mr. Mertoun's carriage was not sent for them in this instance, and they travelled second class by a circuitous route, yet Helen enjoyed the journey, and was especially pleased to find Dennis O'Brien waiting for them on the platform at Bixley. He greeted them

warmly, but when Henry wondered whether Helen could find her own way to Leasowes, he said in a cold and constrained voice: "She will not have to do so; Mr. Mertoun's carriage is waiting outside."

They passed out of the gate, and there in fact was the light, open carriage, with Amy leaning back in it, looking prettier than ever in her light summer toilette. It was easy to understand why she had not gone on the platform; for when Dennis emerged from the doorway, and she leaned forward with an eager determination to be recognised, he looked straight before him and walked past the carriage, to stand some paces off while Henry greeted one sister and put the other into the carriage. He lost no time in rejoining his friend and they walked off, arm-in-arm, while the sisters were whirled on through the streets of Bixley.

"Dennis O'Brien is really too childish and absurd," said Amy, quite startled out of her usual placidity of manner: "this is not the first time I have passed him in the carriage, and he has always refused to see me. Two or three of our country neighbours have made his acquaintance, and it will be awkward and annoying to meet him at their houses while he is in this irrational humour."

"Awkward indeed!" rejoined Helen, who was fuming with indignation at O'Brien's wrongs, but Amy was too much absorbed in the sense of her own injuries to notice to which side her sympathy was given.

"I must try to speak to Henry about it to-mor-

row," she continued; "he may be able to convince Dennis of the folly and injustice of placing me in this uncomfortable position."

"I doubt whether you will get much satisfaction out of Henry. Do not let us talk of Dennis now, since it is a subject on which we can never agree. How nice you look, Amy! Is it all as pleasant as you intended it to be?"

"Even more pleasant. I cannot tell you how kind Uncle Richard is to me, and Eva and I are like sisters together."

"Perhaps the tie is closer than that of sisters in general," said Helen, who had not got all the satisfaction she desired out of that relationship. "Eva said the same thing in her letter to mother. It was good of her to ask me here, and I have come chiefly to please the mother who wants so much to hear of you, but it is an extravagance which may not be repeated, even if you keep me in kid gloves. Admire the shapely appearance of my hands! I began to work my fingers into the trammels of civilisation when I reached the Bixley junction, in order that I might display them to you in unsullied glory."

Amy smiled at the thought that if Dennis O'Brien were destined to be the crumpled rose-leaf in her lot, any annoyance he might cause her was cheaply purchased by her immunity from such sordid economies. She laid a disapproving finger on Helen's neck-tie, the only article of her dress, with the exception of the gloves aforesaid, which bore any appearance of

newness, and asked, "Where did you buy that gaudy thing? It goes very ill with your dress."

"I did not buy it at all, Amy: it was an offering of esteem and regard from Mr. Benson, when I went about my last lot of work. I had an impression that it was rather vulgar, but as he assured me it was a sweet, genteel thing, I could not hurt his feelings by declining the gift."

"At all events you might keep it for Allerton church; you will not meet Mr. Benson here."

"That is true," said Helen, as she took off the obnoxious ribbon and slipped it into her pocket; "you see how amenable I am, but you must not be *too* critical of my manners and appearance, or I shall become still more awkward than I am by nature. Is not this Swiss cottage which has broken out in chimnies the lodge to Leasowes? please put my bonnet straight while I compose myself into a becoming attitude of lady-like ease, and assume my very properest behaviour."

Helen's bantering tone, combined with the discomposure excited by O'Brien's behaviour, had ruffled Amy's gentle temper, and when the two sisters entered the drawing-room they were constrained and ill at ease; so that Eva thought that the kindest thing she could do was to suggest that they should adjourn to Amy's room to finish their talk, and then join her on the lawn, to drink tea under the limes. They went upstairs accordingly, but the flow of talk was still languid and intermittent: Amy asked sweetly after her

mother, displayed some tokens of Eva's lavish affection in the trinkets on her toilette table, listened with faint interest to one or two items of Allerton news, and then betrayed the subject which still occupied her mind by the abrupt remark:

"If Henry will not stir in the matter, Helen, perhaps you can speak to Dennis O'Brien."

"I do not suppose that I shall have the opportunity," replied Helen.

"You will probably see him at the station when you go away on Monday, and I shall not be there, as Henry will be sure to take the early train."

"And if I do see him, what am I to say—that you made a mistake in casting him off and only want to be asked again?"

"I call that extreme impertinence," said Amy with unwonted heat: "he has no right to cut me, because I decline to see him as my lover. I am far from wishing to renew our former intimacy, but he ought to be able to meet me on the terms of ordinary politeness."

"Cold-hearted people may be polite to those they have once loved, Amy, but it is not in Dennis's nature to forget. Besides you announced your intention of cutting him, so at least he told Henry."

"Dennis took fire at once, and was too angry and unreasonable to understand my meaning. I did say that as we should live in such different sets we must not expect to meet, but as it happens we are likely to do so. Mr. Wray, who is a scientific man, and

interested in the Museum, has taken a fancy to him, and I know that he is invited to a croquet at the Hollies this week. And if Lady Cecilia and Mr. Wray take him up, he will be asked everywhere."

"So you wish me to tell him to avoid such complications by keeping away. Perhaps you got Eva to ask me to Leasowes on purpose to arrange your little difficulties?"

"You take a perverse pleasure in misunderstanding me, Helen. I can be shut out from no society to which Eva is admitted, but it will be very much to Dennis's disadvantage if the world is allowed to see that there is this absurd *tracasserie*."

"For which, however, Dennis is not responsible. But if it is likely to do him any harm, I have no objection to try to set matters straight between you, although I warn you that you could not have chosen a worse go-between." The concession, which was not graciously made, was really gratefully received, and Amy was glad to let the conversation drift from a subject on which the sisters' views differed so widely.

"You like a romance, Helen, and may be introduced to one in real life to-morrow. Since Eva has not said a word to me on the subject, it is no breach of confidence to tell you that I am nearly sure that she feels a certain interest in Lord Alan Rae, and one of her friends told me that he paid her great attention last summer. He is handsome and agreeable, and will one day be the Marquis of Raeburn, and as it is a poor peerage Eva's fortune will

be very acceptable. Lady Cecilia's anxiety to bring about the match is only too apparent, and I believe that may hold Lord Alan back."

"Do you call that a romance, Amy? I should call it a commercial transaction, since Eva's fortune is the equivalent for a peerage. Her noble lover will expect an extra ten thousand pounds if he discovers that another Miss Mertoun is journeywoman to the draper of Allerton."

"Your habit of turning everything into ridicule is very unsatisfactory," said Amy. "I thought that you would be interested in what so nearly concerns Eva's happiness, for she is evidently very much attached to him."

"I beg your pardon, and Eva's," replied Helen, "but you said nothing about the attachment in the first instance, and I was so uplifted by the idea of being cousin to a live Marchioness that I could think of nothing else."

"Tea is brought out on the lawn," said Amy shortly, and neither of the girls was unwilling to rejoin Eva there. The sweet sights and sounds of the May afternoon exercised their due influence on Helen's cynical spirit and she flitted from the garden to the conservatory, amazing Eva by the quickness with which she named the species of rare flowers which she had never seen, or had seen only in illustrations, and she was still more astonished when Helen mentioned Dennis O'Brien as the authority for some of her botanical statements.

"Is that the same Mr. Dennis O'Brien who is the new curator of the Museum? I did not know that you were acquainted with him," said Eva.

"We have known him ever since we came to Allerton; he is Henry's greatest friend," replied Helen without pausing to consider how Amy was to account for her suppression of this fact.

"Then I hope that Henry may bring him here to-morrow," said Eva. "Mr. Wray and Lord Alan both say that he is charming."

"He certainly will not come here," said Helen bluntly, and then, looking up with a sudden perception of Amy's embarrassment, she wandered off into the conservatory, leaving her sister to explain the matter if she chose.

Eva, incapable of interpreting it to Amy's disadvantage, was already prepared with an explanation. "I suppose that I must not guess, Amy, why Mr. O'Brien will not come here, nor why you said nothing of your previous acquaintance."

"I do not mind *your* surmises," said Amy, relieved by the unsuspiciousness which acquitted her of any wilful insincerity, "if the matter does not go further. Mr. O'Brien has not quite got over his disappointment, and I wish that our first meeting were over."

"If it takes place at the Hollies next week, I will promise to look another way," said Eva smiling, and Amy felt grateful to Helen for the incautious speech which had enabled her to represent the situation in such a satisfactory light.

CHAPTER VI.

The Beetle-Hunt.

HELEN found the evening at Leasowes long, and she believed that the Sunday which was to follow might be yet more tedious. She regarded the visit as a thing to be done, and to talk of afterwards; but she doubted whether it would bear repetition, on other grounds besides those of economy. Intercourse with Amy could only bring home to her the fact that their lives were drifting further asunder, and her sister's complicated relations with Dennis O'Brien must continue to be a source of irritation. Nor could Helen look forward to the delivery of her sister's message to Dennis with any satisfaction, believing that he might resent her intervention as an impertinence, so that on the whole she was disposed to wish herself back at Allerton.

When Sunday came, Helen found that she was to drive into Bixley for morning service, with her sister and cousin. She was too much dismayed by the critical glances which her uncle Richard darted at her from under his shaggy eyebrows to propose to walk with him; and it did not occur to the other two girls that she despised the advantage of coming into church cool and fresh, with a toilette unsullied by the dusty road-way.

The modern and unsightly parish church was situated in the heart of Bixley, and the Mertoun family occupied a spacious pew in the gallery conspicuous by its fittings and position, and commanding a view of the whole congregation. Even at Allerton Henry and O'Brien had been apt to stray in search of some rural church, and Helen did not therefore expect to see them in such an assembly of middle-class respectability. There were, however, several of Eva's acquaintance with whom she exchanged greetings at the conclusion of the service; and a tall, fair young man, whom Helen at once divined to be Lord Alan Rae, was waiting for them at the foot of the gallery stairs.

"Yes, I walked in," he said, in reply to Eva's inquiries: "a Sunday with one's relations is apt to run to length, and I knew that I might depend on your giving me luncheon. It is the only day on which I can find Mr. Mertoun at home."

Mr. Mertoun heard and was not insensible to the implied compliment, and urged Lord Alan to take the vacant place in the carriage.

"Indeed Papa prefers walking: perhaps you would like to walk with him," said Eva, when Lord Alan appealed to her, and he took the place opposite to her in the carriage without further demur, a fact which had its due significance in the eyes of the little world of Bixley. The short drive was long enough to modify the democratic bias with which Helen was prepared to regard the first live lord with whom she had come

in contact. His pleasant voice and manner might not have subdued her, but one little speech went straight to her heart.

"There is the Museum, in which I spent a most agreeable hour yesterday with the new curator—a great contrast to poor old Jenkins who used to potter over his curiosities with shaking hands, and if I asked a question out of the beaten track he only stared at me with his lack-lustre eyes. My uncle is delighted with this young O'Brien: he says that he is better informed than most men of twice his age and will certainly make a name for himself in the scientific world. And he is so modest and unassuming, really a thorough gentleman, and a little unwilling to be patronized. Lady Cecilia is bent on securing him for her croquet on Wednesday, but he would not pledge himself to come."

"I hope that I shall soon make his acquaintance, even if we do not meet at the Hollies," said Eva; and Helen, who had been on the point of proclaiming her prior friendship, understood her cousin's guarded tone, and held her peace.

After luncheon, Mr. Mertoun retreated into his own room, to look over the miscellaneous correspondence which was not allowed to interfere with the more regular business of office hours, since it was reserved as an occupation for Sunday afternoons. The servant came in to know if the carriage would be wanted again, and Eva was not unwilling to be told that she looked tired, and had better not think of

going to the afternoon service. They stepped out to sit in the verandah, and Amy was considering the expediency of withdrawing herself and Helen to some other part of the lawn, when Henry Mertoun, who had just been ushered into the drawing-room, came out through the open window to join them. Eva would have sent for her father, but Henry interposed to prevent the summons.

"Do not disturb my uncle now, Eva, as I intend to pay my visit later in the afternoon. I have only looked in to see whether Helen would like to join our walk. Dennis says," he continued, addressing his sister, "that he has found some famous hunting grounds for beetles, to which he wishes to introduce you."

"The very thing I was wishing for!" exclaimed Helen, joyously starting to her feet: "I will run up to get ready, and will not keep you waiting half a minute, Henry." And her expeditious movements made the interval which Dennis O'Brien had been forced to employ in pacing up and down outside the lodge gates as brief as possible.

"That was the most heavenly idea of yours, Dennis," said Helen, with a renewed burst of exultation; "I am sure that I need not give Henry the credit of it; and I should have been stifled if I had been doomed to sit there all the afternoon and evening, with my company manners on."

"The suggestion was not wholly disinterested," replied O'Brien: "Mertoun has little toleration for

what he profanely calls bug-hunting, and it is a pursuit which is much better carried on in partnership. This is quite a new range for beetles, although it is scarcely ten miles from our old haunts, and I hope that I shall at last be able to teach you the distinction between a *carabus* and a *cicindela*."

And of *carabidæ* and *cicindelæ* the two young collectors continued to talk, with an occasional excursion into the wider fields of physical science, until Henry protested against such barren disquisition, and demanded an account of Helen's proceedings at Leasowes.

"The life there is just what I imagined," she replied: "Eva is very gentle and nice, and Uncle Richard is certainly more agreeable in his own house, although still rather alarming." And here Helen paused, unwilling to wound Dennis by filling in the family group with any account of Amy.

"Go on, Helen," said Dennis, looking at her keenly: "I am less thin-skinned than you imagine, and you will not hurt my feelings."

"Then," said Helen, who was ever rash of speech, "I think I ought to tell you that you have hurt Amy's feelings. She cannot understand why you have cut her."

"Is she so dull of comprehension? I am following her injunctions to the letter."

"Then perhaps you have mistaken the spirit. I am charged to tell you that you ought not to keep out of her way, nor refuse to recognize her as a

former acquaintance. There,—I have delivered my message with Homeric accuracy, and do not want to hear any more of it. It is no affair of mine."

Both the young men laughed, and it was evident that if disappointment still rankled in O'Brien's breast he was resolved that it should not crush him. His buoyancy of spirit was sustained by the success he had already achieved; and he talked hopefully of the future, and of the encouragement given him by Mr. Wray. He spoke of Lord Alan with less enthusiasm declaring him to be agreeable, but dilettante and superficial.

"You are ungrateful," said Helen. "I have met him at Leasowes, and he said many civil things of you."

"It is the way of the family," rejoined Dennis; "he brought his aunt to the Museum last week; a terrible woman, who asked fatuous questions, and talked fulsomely."

"Lord Alan detected your dread of being patronized," said Helen, "and hoped that it would not prevent you from accepting Lady Cecilia's invitations. Her name is always coming to the surface at Leasowes, and I wanted to know what she is like."

"She means to be good-natured, I really believe," said Dennis, "but she is as vulgar-minded as a lady of quality can be, and often is."

"You talk as if you had a wide experience of the species," remarked Henry, sardonically.

"I admit that I was talking at large," said O'Brien

with a laugh: "we democrats are too apt to fancy that we know things by intuition."

"I think that you ought to accept her invitations, however," continued Henry: "it would not do to affront Mr. Wray, and besides, there must be a certain relief in getting beyond the range of Bixley tea-parties."

"When did you adopt the maxims of Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Henry?" said Dennis, good-humouredly: "they have not been your own rule of action. Since I came here, I find that your uncle is in some sort the king of Bixley, and, from what you told me some time ago, I fancy that you had only to hold out your hand to become the heir apparent."

"I do not regret my decision," answered Henry: "there were painful circumstances connected with our early life at Bixley which made my mother unwilling to return to it; and, although my foot is now on the lowest rung of the ladder, I may work my way up, as my uncle has done before me."

"I wish that I could transplant you all here however. Do tell your mother how often I think of the happy evenings we have passed together, and how happy I should still be in her house although the glamour of the old days has departed."

"Is not this a good beetle ground?" said Helen, with a wholesome desire to escape from such allusions. "I am sure that rotten old stump is worth probing." Dennis took out his knife, and while Henry disposed himself to the comfortable enjoyment of the "Saturday

Review," with a pipe in his mouth and his back against a tree, his companions set to work to poke and probe, and burrow and potter, with an ardour which left no scope for any interest in life except beetles.

If Eva had witnessed this harmony of tastes, it would have confirmed the surmise which she imparted to Amy that afternoon. "Do you know, Amy, that I am not quite so sorry for Mr. O'Brien as I was yesterday. When I saw how Helen's face lighted up at the prospect of walking with him, it occurred to me that he might be induced to console himself."

"With Helen? there can be nothing less likely," said Amy, slightly injured by the suggestion: "there is a sort of tutor and pupil bond between them, and Helen is much more of a schoolboy than a woman. At all events she is not the woman whom Dennis O'Brien will ever love."

Amy's tone of positive assurance enabled her cousin's lively imagination to take a leap in a different direction, and she began to suspect that Amy's rejection of Mr. O'Brien had not been final. It was an inference which Eva was the more ready to draw, since her peace of mind had been disturbed that afternoon by a nameless fear lest Lord Alan's evident admiration for Amy's beauty might further unsettle his wavering allegiance to herself. He undoubtedly appeared less gratified than Amy had intended him to be by her declaration that she must go into the house

to write some letters, leaving him and Eva on the lawn.

Lord Alan's eyes followed her retreating figure and a sudden pang impelled Eva to ask, "Do you admire my cousin's beauty as much as I do?"

"I suppose that every one must admire her. In her own style she is almost faultless," said Lord Alan.

Eva faintly hoped that a less faultless style of beauty might win favour in his eyes, but Lord Alan did not make the most of his opportunities that afternoon. He observed that his five miles walk had made him lazy, and readily acquiesced in the suggestion that they might sit more comfortably indoors. If, however, he had been swayed by a desire for further contemplation of Amy's beauty, he was again baffled, since Amy had retreated to her own room, and was at that moment in the enjoyment of the peaceful slumber which seemed to her the legitimate reward of Sunday morning's attendance at church—a slumber undisturbed by recollections of the lovers' walks among the lanes and flowery coppices, which had given a charm to bygone Sundays.

Lord Alan looked at his watch and observed that he had a long walk before him, and that he must get back to the Hollies in time to rest and cool before dinner. "We shall meet on Wednesday at latest —sooner if I can devise an errand into Bixley," he said as he took leave of Eva, and his smile, and the pressure of his hand, made her heart throb with pleasure which seemed to her ill-grounded when she

was left alone to think over the matter. She knew how it was with herself, but the hunger of her heart after a solution of the old, old question was as yet unsatisfied—seemed at this moment further from satisfaction than before. A year ago there had been no such questionings, and she had given away her heart without a doubt that her affection was requited. A girl of seventeen, still unused to attentions of which she had since received her full share, she had abandoned herself to a dream of happiness; and when, after a few short weeks of intimacy, Lord Alan went away, and made no sign, she awoke from it to feel that she had been misled by a too susceptible vanity to misconstrue his transient admiration. Some secret tears had been shed, some bitter moments of shame and humiliation had been lived down, and she resolved to think of him no more; but Lady Cecilia's influence had been exerted to keep the interest alive in her heart, and, when Lord Alan himself appeared once more on the scene, all her resolutions were scattered to the winds. She could not give him up while a hope remained, but she was determined to be guarded, and to rely only on facts as proof of his sentiments, and the fact which at this moment stared her in the face was, that he had deliberately thrown away the opportunity of spending a precious hour alone with her.

When Amy came downstairs, refreshed by her nap and prepared to enjoy the afternoon cup of tea, she was too discreet to express any surprise at finding Eva alone. Mr. Mertoun also emerged from his den, and

almost immediately afterwards Helen and her brother returned from their walk—Helen still radiant with pleasure, while her dusty and travel-worn appearance revealed traces of the afternoon's occupation, and her healthy appetite for the slices of brown bread and butter threatened to interfere with her enjoyment of the dinner which was to follow. Henry's manner insensibly assumed the stiff, reserved politeness which was apt to chill Mr. Mertoun's attempt to establish more friendly relations: he repeated his refusal to stay to dinner; and cut short his visit, on the plea that he and O'Brien were going to evening service.

"After all, I do not think the worse of the lad for being so stiff and independent," said Richard Mertoun when he was alone with his daughter. "It is a fault on the right side at any rate, and he does not take after his father, who made a point of never doing anything for himself which he could get other people to do for him."

Eva was more disposed to resent Henry's determination to stand aloof, for she understood the strength of her father's desire to see one of his own name succeed to the business which it had been the labour of his life to create, and it seemed to her a noble and legitimate ambition.

Since Henry was impracticable she resolved to indoctrinate Helen with her views, and they talked long and earnestly together that evening. Helen was deeply interested in Eva's account of the circumstances connected with her father's death, of which she, as

well as Amy, had remained in ignorance, and she was willing to accept the diplomatic mission with which she was charged.

CHAPTER VII.

Confidences.

HELEN returned home in high spirits, and with such a budget of lively gossip as seldom brightened the even tenor of her life at Allerton. Dennis's success in his new career, as well as Amy's entire satisfaction with her position, were subjects on which it was pleasant to enlarge; and they were almost equally gratifying to Mrs. Mertoun's motherly instincts, since she had adopted O'Brien as another son. Helen did not, however, think fit to unfold her mission from Eva until she was alone with her eldest brother. Mrs. Mertoun, as well as Dick, kept early hours, and when they had retired for the night, Henry was apt to give himself up to hard reading, while Helen drew out a basket of undarned socks which would provide her with occupation for some time to come. Although she had a great talent for silence, she did not on this occasion scruple to interrupt her brother's studies.

"I doubt whether Dick will do any more good at school, Henry. He has learned nothing for the last six months."

"I doubt it too," answered Henry; "it is of no use to pour more into a vessel than it will hold, and

Dick's vessel is of small capacity. But a boy of fifteen cannot earn a livelihood, and if I were to take him from school, he would only loaf about the streets."

"Eva suggested that he might make a start in Uncle Richard's office; and I think the vocation might suit him, as he has a turn for figures, and a superficial smartness about outside things."

"Are you going over to the Bixley faction?" said Henry, looking up quickly; "why should I accept for Dick a position I declined for myself?"

"Because you are of different fibre. There is no self-assertion about Dick, and, if he would be steady and take an interest in his work, I think that he would get on with Uncle Richard. If he went to Bixley we might consign him to Dennis, who would employ his leisure hours in the mounting of beetles and other innocent pastimes."

"You ride your hobby hard when you make a moral engine of bug-hunting," said Henry with a laugh which was readily echoed by his sister.

"It is a fact, however, even when you put it in that insulting form. It is a grand resource to have a definite pursuit, and it has saved me from eating my heart out with vexation at the prospect of having to spend the best years of my life in stitching on vulgar and fussy trimmings. I imagine that the handling of your neighbour's money must be nearly as disheartening an occupation, and you would be ever so much pleasanter, both to yourself and your family, if you

were to take up a science. I have thought of suggesting chemistry, on which subject I am blankly ignorant."

"Long may you remain so! If you begin to dabble in chemistry, you and Dick would infallibly blow us out of the house with hideous stinks."

"You need not be uneasy. Botany and beetles will satisfy my aspirations for the next ten years, by which time I hope to be qualified to become professor at the female college of science which Dennis and I intend to establish in Utopia."

"Ten years hence I predict that Dennis will have abandoned his Utopian schemes for a career of prosperous common sense. If he goes on as he has begun at Bixley he will become the fashion, and marry a Duchess's daughter."

"If he were to marry twenty Duchesses, he would never be disloyal to his old friends. However this is beside the question of Dick's future, and there is nothing Utopian in my project for his advancement in life."

"Scheme as you please, Helen; but there is no need to make up our minds unless Uncle Richard makes a *bonâ fide* offer to take the boy into his office."

"Eva says that the offer will not be made unless he is sure that it will be accepted. The fact is," continued Helen, with the tendency to moralize which is apt to pervade conversation as we approach the small hours of the night, "the fact is that the Mertouns are

a thin-skinned family, and we must respect his little feelings as well as our own. Taken all together, I do not admire the family peculiarities of hardness and touchiness which stamp the race. You and I know our own asperities only too well, and Dick is cased in a surly shell which it is very hard to penetrate."

"Amy is soft enough," said Ralph.

"On the outside; she has the softness and bloom of a peach, but sooner or later you come down upon the hard stone with an unpleasant jar."

"The stone being the organ which represents her heart? I suppose that your resentment of O'Brien's wrongs has inspired the simile. Did Amy help you and Eva in the hatching of this plot?"

"Eva suggested it to me when we were alone together," replied Helen, "and asked me to lay it before you and mother. I have begun with you because it worries her to hear us wrangling over any point at issue after our amiable fashion, and she likes to be spared the burden of decision."

"I think that he had better go," said Henry, after a pause; "it is absurd to raise objections when Amy is already one of the Bixley Mertouns, and, as you say, O'Brien will have his eye on the boy. I will talk to my mother about it to-morrow." There was no want of filial duty in the tacit assumption that the matter was already decided, for Mrs. Mertoun, prematurely aged by a struggling life of anxieties and privations, had for some time resigned the reins to her grave, resolute son, who was ready to think as well as

to act for her, and before whose living presence the shadowy authority of her dead husband must inevitably wane. Helen was satisfied with the success of her generalship, and felt some natural irritation when, after the plan had taken shape, and it was arranged that young Richard should enter his uncle's office when the school broke up for the midsummer holidays, Amy took credit for the whole arrangement, and hoped that Henry would now admit that her migration to Leasowes had been prompted by a desire to promote the welfare of her family, and not for her own personal benefit.

The Leasowes household was meanwhile agitated by a discussion which bore no reference to Dick's future career. It was on the evening preceding the day of Lady Cecilia's croquet-party that Mr. Mertoun came home to dinner silent and preoccupied; but he was so often immersed in the cares of business that the girls scarcely noticed his abstraction, and, when bed-time came, Amy went up alone, Eva lingering as she was apt to do for a few last words with her father. When she came upstairs, after a longer interval than usual, Amy did not observe that there was anything amiss until Eva broke down in the attempt to reply to some trivial remark, and burst into a flood of tears.

"What can I do for you, dearest? Only tell me what is the matter," said Amy, when the tenderest caresses failed to calm her cousin's agitation.

"It is nothing, nothing really: I was flurried by what Papa said," replied Eva at last.

Amy's unromantic imagination instantly conjectured that some commercial disaster had involved her uncle in ruin, and she said breathlessly, "Must you also exchange riches for poverty?"

Eva almost smiled through her tears: "Oh no, Amy, it is not that. It may seem absurd to say so, but I hope that I should bear the loss of fortune with greater fortitude. I have been grateful to you, Amy, for saying nothing of Lord Alan, since I could not have borne it even from you. And now it is hard to find that the gossips of Bixley have been making mischief by coupling our names together. The whole thing is a revelation to Papa, though I thought he might have guessed—"

"People will gossip," said Amy, who could think of no more consolatory utterance than this truism, and it did in fact occur to her that she would have been less grievously disconcerted by any rumour which might credit her with a lordly lover.

"Papa means to be kind," continued Eva with another shower of tears: "he asked if there was any understanding between us, and when I said no, he said that it was the greatest relief to him."

"But why?" asked Amy: "he seemed pleased to see Lord Alan on Sunday."

"Only, he says now, because he has a regard for Lady Cecilia and Mr. Wray, and wished to show every civility to their nephew. Some one has been prejudicing him against Lord Alan, telling him that he has been wild and unsteady, and I know not what besides.

But the most terrible thing is about the insanity in the family: he does not believe that Lord Macrae's imbecility is caused by an accident, and he thinks it probable that Lord Alan may have the same tendency."

"Oh Eva!" exclaimed Amy, inexpressibly shocked, "how can he say anything so cruel?"

"He does not intend to be cruel," replied Eva: "it is Papa's way to state facts plainly, and he did not, could not know how he was rending my heart. He wished to open my eyes before it was too late. But it is too late."

"If he is attached to you," said Amy hesitating, and Eva caught up the word.

"You may say '*if*,' Amy. You cannot feel more doubtful than I do myself. A year ago I did not doubt, and since then I have tried to forget words and looks which perhaps may have meant nothing. He is all the world to me, and I am not even sure that he cares for me a little."

"He must care for you," said Amy: "Lady Cecilia's manner would be very different if he were not in earnest."

"I do not doubt that Lady Cecilia is in earnest. She has said so much of the necessity of Lord Alan's marrying well that I cannot pretend to be in doubt as to her motive. And if he is in debt, as Papa says, he might be driven to make me an offer, but not because he loves me as I want to be loved." And Eva hid her face, with a moan of plaintive despair. Since

words of comfort failed, Amy tried to soothe her by gesture, laying her cool finger-tips on her cousin's throbbing temples.

The contrast in their moods impelled Eva to speak again. "How unlike we are, Amy. You will never dash yourself to pieces against the bars of fate: you have the repose of strength, while I am weak and storm-tossed. You must not despise me because you know my secret, but help me to shield it from the knowledge of others. Papa says that we must go to this miserable party to-morrow, and that I must be guarded in my manner to Lord Alan, as there will be more gossip if I stay away."

"I will help you all I can," said Amy; and she prevailed on Eva to go to bed, and only left her when she declared, in the piteous tone of a child exhausted by a storm of passion, that she would rather be alone and in the dark. Amy went to her room, and sat up late, thinking over the unreasonable prejudices which induced Mr. Mertoun to thwart Eva's cherished hopes: she could see nothing in Lord Alan's gay and self-possessed manner to justify the fear of hereditary insanity, and she accepted Lady Cecilia's adjustment of the scales when she balanced Lord Alan's noble birth against Eva's fortune. The combination of the two seemed to Amy to make up the sum of earthly happiness.

The morning brought some further explanation of Mr. Mertoun's views. The maid who brought Amy her hot water informed her that her master hoped that

she would be able to speak a word with him before breakfast, and Amy dressed in haste and repaired to her uncle's study.

"Have you seen Eva this morning?" he inquired anxiously.

"Not this morning, Uncle Richard: I was with her last night."

"I thought that I heard you both moving about late. Of course she told you what I said to her, since girls always like to talk over their love affairs, real or imaginary."

"Yes, Uncle Richard," said Amy timidly. She was anxious to stand well with her uncle, without being disloyal to her friend.

"And this affair I take to be imaginary," continued Richard Mertoun, bending his keen grey eyes on Amy with a searching glance. "I suppose that she told me all the truth, when she assured me that there was no engagement, nor even a tacit understanding between them."

"I think that Eva was most pained by the discovery that people were gossipping about her," said Amy: "she never mentioned Lord Alan to me until last night, and then she said that she did not believe that he really cared for her."

"She is so shrinking and sensitive," said Mr. Mertoun: "I have not been able to sleep all night for thinking how much I had wounded her, and yet it is evident that the warning was not given too soon. Nothing could induce me to let her marry into the Rae

family: I know from those who are well informed that there has been a taint in the blood for many generations, and that while the women do not turn out badly, the men are nearly all vicious or insane. This Lord Alan is agreeable enough in society, a gentleman, and with plenty to say for himself, but your fine young gentlemen do not always make the best husbands, and of course he is liable to break out like the rest. I hear that he is a little wild in his talk even now, especially after dinner."

"Eva seems anxious to do all that you wish," said Amy.

"She is a good child," replied the father, tenderly: "I still hope that I am more to her than any handsome young lord who may have tried to turn her head with a few soft sayings, without making any deep impression on her heart. Is it not so, Amy?"

"Indeed I hope so, Uncle Richard."

"You are a sensible girl yourself," resumed Mr. Mertoun, encouraged by his niece's assent; "I rely upon your tact and judgment in any difficulties which may arise. It is clearly better for Eva to go to this party at the Hollies, or the tongues of our gossipping neighbours would wag faster than before; and I would not go myself, even if I could spare the time, lest Eva should imagine that I distrusted and wished to watch her. You may be able to do more than I can to detach Lord Alan and ward off a declaration by which Eva would be unreasonably distressed. I do

not enter into particulars, since you must be guided by circumstances as they arise."

"Yes, Uncle Richard," said Amy, a little perplexed by instructions which were of so vague a nature. How was she to aid in the process of "detachment," and had the slight tokens of Lord Alan's admiration for herself, which had sent a pang through Eva's bosom, been noticed by other eyes? Amy had no leisure to solve this question at once, and could only resolve to follow her uncle's advice in one particular, and to be guided by circumstances.

CHAPTER VIII.

Butterfly-hunting.

Eva and her cousin set out on their drive to the Hollies a little late, and yet not late enough to provoke any special comment by the tardiness of their arrival. The two girls were dressed alike, in rather fanciful Watteau costumes, which gave piquancy to Amy's beauty, and pointed her resemblance to a porcelain shepherdess; but in Eva's case the effect was less successful: it may have been ill suited to her style of beauty, or only have been marred by her sad and anxious heart, but in any case the contrast between the cousins left all the advantage on Amy's side. It was Eva however whom Lady Cecilia welcomed with gracious distinction.

"My dear Eva! as each carriage drew up, I trusted

that it was yours. Alan was quite in despair at having to begin a game without you, as he said that you promised to be here early, and at last we arranged that Mr. Wray should hold your mallet."

"Perhaps you will allow my cousin to play instead of me," said Eva: "I have a headache which made me doubtful about coming at all, and I cannot do more than sit in the shade with you."

Lady Cecilia could only assent, but when she took Amy across the turf to join the knot of players, she had a different arrangement to suggest: "Eva Mertoun cannot play, Alan," she said in a low voice to her nephew, "would you like to give up your mallet to her cousin?"

"As Miss Amy Mertoun pleases," said Lord Alan politely, "but I know that my uncle is dying to be released."

While Amy protested that she would rather look on than interfere with the game, another of the players turned towards her. It was Dennis O'Brien, and, while Amy changed colour, he bowed with the distant coolness of a slight acquaintance.

"How do you do, Miss Mertoun," he said quietly; "I need scarcely say that you do me no favour in taking my mallet. You know of old that I am no croquet player."

There was nothing in the words to strike the ear of strangers, but they made Amy's heart beat with unruly vehemence which rendered her perfectly incapable of reply. She took the mallet from O'Brien's hand

without a word, angry with her own want of presence of mind and with her former lover's stinging indifference, but a little consoled by Lord Alan's undisguised satisfaction in the arrangement which made Amy his partner in the game. Mr. Wray, who had only consented to play on the understanding that he should give way to the first comer, was less gratified by the unceremonious haste with which Dennis escaped from his proposal to make a fresh transfer, and he took up his mallet again with an air of melancholy resignation, prepared to become once more the object of his young lady partner's withering scorn, as he frustrated all her policy by his blundering strokes. It was one of the occasions on which Mr. Wray was unable to free himself from the rôle assigned to him among many of his acquaintance, of being only Lady Cecilia's husband, although his individuality was fully recognized in the set of scientific men with whom he preferred to associate.

Amy could not at once respond with spirit to Lord Alan's efforts to interest her in the game. The meeting with Dennis had passed off well, and his guarded manner and cool politeness were exactly what she had herself prescribed, but the readiness with which he had followed the prescription was not flattering to her self-esteem, and she felt that it was due to herself to evince equal indifference by replying to Lord Alan's soft sayings with a bewitching gentleness of manner which had its due effect in rivetting the chains in which her beauty had already begun to

enthrall his fickle affections. Mr. Mertoun could scarcely have anticipated such prompt and efficient co-operation when he invoked her aid in the work of "detachment," and Eva watched the process with a sore and swelling heart. To Lady Cecilia also it appeared that her elaborately planned croquet-party would prove an unprofitable investment, and she flitted about in restless dissatisfaction, as impatient of the protracted game as Mr. Wray himself; and more deeply injured when Lord Alan and Amy disappeared at its conclusion down a grass alley, from which they only emerged again late in the afternoon.

Lord Alan then came up to address Eva for the first time since her arrival: "I hope that you are feeling better, Miss Mertoun; I am so grieved to hear that you are suffering from headache. Your cousin missed a good deal of lively excitement in not being able to join our game," he added, appealing to Amy.

"Amy plays a better game than I do," said Eva, simply; and it may have been only her cousin's uneasy conscience which detected any double meaning in the remark.

"She played remarkably well," said Lord Alan, "and we were both exhausted with our exertions, and glad to sit down and rest among the ferns. I think you know the place, Miss Mertoun?"

"The fernery? yes, I know it well," replied Eva. She too had spent a long afternoon in its refreshing shade, with Lord Alan by her side, just a year ago.

"I am afraid that the tea and coffee are both cold:

perhaps you would prefer an ice?" said Lady Cecilia, turning stiffly to Amy.

"Let me send for a cup of hot coffee, Miss Mertoun," said Lord Alan, eagerly bending forward: "it is my fault that we are so late. Unless, indeed, you prefer an ice?"

"Indeed, I do," said Amy, looking prettier than ever through her diffident blushes, and it is not given to every woman to blush becomingly. But, as Lady Cecilia remarked to her friends, there was no soul in such pink and white prettiness. She was one of the large-bodied women who love to talk of the soul.

Eva had not been left entirely on Lady Cecilia's hands that afternoon, for Dennis O'Brien was introduced to her and they had some talk together. His eyes, as well as Eva's, followed the croquet-players persistently, and a vague desire to ascertain the true nature of his relations to Amy prompted Eva's remark: "I think, Mr. O'Brien, you knew my cousin at Allerton?"

"I know them all," said Dennis: "Henry is my great friend, and our intimacy made me almost one of the family. I miss the home life in my lodgings at Bixley."

"Helen said that they missed you at Allerton," said Eva: "what an odd, clever girl she is, quite unlike girls in general."

"I am partly responsible for her singularity," said Dennis: "it has been pleasant to teach anyone of so much originality and power of research, yet I do not

altogether plume myself on the result. She might distinguish herself as a man, but I doubt whether she will be a popular or agreeable woman."

The critical tone of this remark convinced Eva that Helen was still, as Amy had said, only a schoolboy in his eyes, and she ventured on the further observation: "The two sisters are very unlike."

"Unlike indeed," said Dennis emphatically, "and not only in externals. But I know them too well to discuss their peculiarities."

It was at this juncture that Mr. Wray came up to congratulate himself on his tardy release from the servitude of croquet, which entitled him to carry off O'Brien to look over his collection of fossils, and Eva was left to discover that Lord Alan did not show the like eagerness to make amends for the time he had lost in the fulfilment of his social duties. She had honestly intended to satisfy her father by discouraging his attentions, but this could not diminish the bitterness of the admission that no discouragement was necessary. Eva was among the first to order her carriage, and when Lord Alan protested against such an early departure, his remonstrances were pointedly addressed to Amy. It was to her also that the remark was made, that he should soon have occasion to go to Bixley and that he would take Leasowes on the way. Mr. Wray took Eva to the carriage and Lord Alan followed, not too closely, with Amy; indeed there were a few moments' delay, to be explained by the

freshly gathered bunch of tea-roses which he left in Amy's lap after she was seated in the carriage.

They had passed through the lodge gates before silence was broken by either of the girls; and Eva leaned back in her corner of the carriage and closed her eyes, perhaps to keep back tears which were ready to fall. At last Amy ventured to take her hand, and to say softly: "Is your head very bad, dear Eva?"

"Not very bad, Amy, but a headache sometimes serves as a convenient excuse when one is out of heart or temper." There was another silence, and then Eva added: "If Papa had been here to-day, he would have been satisfied that the gossips of Bixley had mistaken the object of Lord Alan's attentions. Is is not so, Amy?"

"Indeed, Eva, I could not help it."

"I suppose not. You can no more help being lovely and lovable than I can help being sought only for my father's money. We shall not quarrel, even about this, Amy: to-morrow and for all days to come I mean to be reasonable." Amy kissed her cousin, and wisely held her peace: it was in order to hide her own embarrassment that she played with the roses in her lap, whilst Eva, in the unreasoning anguish of a tortured heart, was ready to ascribe the unconscious action to her desire to flaunt such proofs of favour in the eyes of her slighted rival.

The other actor in this little drama did not escape a severer criticism. Lady Cecilia had spent more

money than she could afford on her garden party, regarding it as an investment of capital which was to produce a speedy return in the shape of her nephew's engagement to Eva Mertoun, and she was naturally indignant at the signal failure of all her schemes. When the last visitor had driven off, and Mr. Wray had retreated to the peaceful seclusion of his own room, for the half hour which still remained before dinner, Lord Alan discovered that he was not to be left to the same repose. He took up a newspaper, but Lady Cecilia was too angry and too much in earnest to be diverted from her object.

"I know how much latitude young men allow themselves, Alan, but, even according to their lax code, I imagine that it is in bad taste to flirt with a pair of cousins who stand almost in the relation of sisters to each other."

"What an alarming prelude, Aunt Cecilia! Pray go on with your lecture," said Alan, with a lazy good-humour which did not modify his aunt's displeasure.

"I really hoped, Alan, that you were in earnest this time, and that you would make a marriage in every way suitable and satisfactory."

"The accusation takes a different form. I hold flirtation to be one of the pleasing preliminaries to marriage."

"Always supposing that you flirt with the right person. You know, Alan, that I have given you every facility for making Eva Mertoun's acquaintance. She

is a thoroughly nice lady-like girl, and the more you know the better you will like her. Last summer you paid her great attention, and now, just as all the neighbourhood is aware of the fact, you slight her in the most glaring manner for a girl whom you saw for the first time ten days ago. I should like to know what your intentions really are."

"I thought that it was only the heavy father of genteel comedy who asked a man about his intentions," said Lord Alan, suppressing a yawn. "However, I have no objection to tell you that I *was* rather taken with your lovely young heiress a year ago. There was a naturalness and piquancy about her manner which I found refreshing, and, if she had come on instead of going off, and also if you had flaunted her money-bags less persistently in my face, I might have drifted into matrimony. But the fates are against it, the rich cousin has become sickly and spiritless, and the poor one is lovely and bewitching and I have no 'intentions,' except that I intend my three months' visit here to be as agreeable as possible."

"Your levity is incorrigible," said Lady Cecilia, and she pondered how the three months' visit could be curtailed. It was true that she had urged her nephew to come up from Scotland, and to stay at the Hollies until the grouse-shooting began; but he had manifestly accepted the invitation on false pretences, if, instead of courting an heiress, he employed his time in an idle flirtation with her penniless cousin.

She broke ground that evening by suggesting to Mr. Wray the expediency of leaving home for a time, but his reply was vague and discouraging. Since his conjugal felicity was not perfect, he preferred to remain at home where the presence of a third person blunted the edge of those sharp sayings which were apt to be exchanged in a domestic tête-à-tête. He said that he was writing a treatise, which made it impossible for him to separate from the contents of his library, but that if Lady Cecilia thought that she could afford it, she might take a run up to London, and he and Alan would keep house together. Lady Cecilia deplored the selfish apathy of mankind, and was constrained to cast about for some other means of breaking off Lord Alan's unprofitable pursuit of Amy Mertoun.

The account of the garden party at the Hollies will scarcely be complete without the comment furnished by the following note from Dennis O'Brien:

"My dear Helen,

"Herewith I return your notes on Somerville, interlined with unsparing criticism, which I sum up in the advice that you should avoid tall English and study compression of style. Henry will be pleased to learn that I can also take advice, since I acted on his politic counsel to attend the aristocratic croquet. It gave me the opportunity of studying the instinct and habits of *Vanessa Cardui*, which are really interesting in a scientific point of view. Perhaps this allusion will be more intelligible to you than it was to Dick,

on the memorable Sunday afternoon when I was disillusioned.

"Yours truly,
"DENNIS O'BRIEN."

CHAPTER IX.

"The Little Rift."

LADY Cecilia's croquet served as a starting-point for other gaieties in the neighbourhood, and the hot June days which followed were occupied by a succession of garden parties. Eva was as reasonable as she had engaged to be. She accepted each invitation as it came without demur, although she knew that Lord Alan Rae must be among the invited guests, and was almost equally confident that he would distinguish Amy by his exclusive attention. Amy's passive manner seemed to endure, rather than to invite, his admiration; and, except for one or two signs, known only to themselves, the affectionate relations between the cousins appeared to be unchanged. There was a change, however, to be felt rather than described. They no longer lingered in each other's rooms at bed-time. There were no more whispered words, and the playful sayings, which bespeak perfect confidence, vanished before the smooth politeness which acts as the veneer of mutual constraint. Amy felt that her position was insecure, and that if at any time the strain on Eva's endurance became too severe, a word

to her father might reveal the estrangement, and procure her exile from Leasowes and a return to the sordid round of cares at Allerton from which she had so recently escaped. Such a possibility struck upon her heart with a chill of dismay, and, since marriage offered the only certain escape from it, Amy could not rise to the pitch of heroism implied in any serious discouragement of Lord Alan's addresses. She told herself that, even if she forbore to snatch the prize, it would not be more within Eva's grasp, since she had accepted her father's decision as irrevocable. That the prize itself might not be worth snatching, did not enter into her calculations.

Mr. Mertoun's objections to the match were ascribed by her to his characteristic reluctance to trust his daughter's happiness to any keeping but his own, and to the natural propensity of mankind to rake up frivolous accusations against those who are raised above the common herd by their rank or noble qualities. The fact still remained that Lord Alan was of noble birth, and Amy's craving for material enjoyment was gratified by the thought that she should enter a sphere where all was harmony and brightness. Besides, she liked Lord Alan for himself, though not perhaps with the same warmth with which she had once liked, or loved, Dennis O'Brien. That sentiment still lingered in her breast, and the gentle deference of Lord Alan's manner did not even now awaken the same conflicting emotions which never failed to be aroused by the few cold and ceremonious words which

Dennis exchanged with her when they chanced to meet. Amy considered that this was only due to the uneasy feeling of shame with which we ever look back to a dead folly, and that the grateful esteem and regard with which she was prepared to devote herself to Lord Alan's happiness were better calculated to outwear the union of a life-time.

While Amy thus arrayed the reasons in favour of accepting the offer of Lord Alan's hand, those who knew him most intimately doubted whether the offer would be ever made. His friends argued that, since Eva's wealth had failed to allure him into repairing the broken fortunes of his family by marriage, he was still less likely to be in earnest in his present suit; and it was chiefly from a disinterested wish to spare Amy's peace of mind, and possibly with the after-thought that her nephew might resume his more serious courtship of Eva if his relations with her were uncomplicated by this additional proof of inconstancy, that Lady Cecilia applied her energies to the task of diverting Lord Alan from his new pursuit. She had failed in her efforts to remove him from the neighbourhood; but there was another mode of effecting her purpose, and it was with this object in view that she drove into Bixley one afternoon, and, calling at Mr. Mertoun's office, she sent in her card to inquire whether he was at leisure and would allow her to come up for a few minutes. But one answer could be given to such a message, and Mr. Mertoun, after the involuntary ejaculation, "What does the woman

want?" sent out a polite request to Lady Cecilia to walk upstairs. He received her stiffly, anticipating an appeal in Lord Alan's favour, and her opening speech did not dissipate this belief.

"It is so good of you, Mr. Mertoun, to allow me to take you by storm in this way. I am really ashamed to trespass upon your valuable time, but the interest I take in your dear Eva must be my excuse."

"Eva is infinitely obliged to you," said Mr. Mertoun, drily.

"Once before," resumed Lady Cecilia, blandly unconscious of his repelling manner, "I ventured to call your attention to Eva's fragile looks. A woman's eye is quick to notice any signs of delicacy, and you will excuse my apparent officiousness in the case of a motherless girl."

"Eva always looks delicate," said Mr. Mertoun, disclaiming almost fiercely the secret anxiety by which he was constantly consumed, "and the great heat we have had lately is trying to her."

"Exactly so," replied Lady Cecilia; "our inland summers are always relaxing. At the sea-side it is different, and it occurred to me that a change of air is all that is needed to restore Eva's strength and tone. I know that it is difficult for you to leave home, but since she has her cousin's companionship, the two girls could go to some quiet sea-side place together."

"It is not a bad suggestion," said Mr. Mertoun, after pausing a moment to consider whether it could be prompted by any motive but that which lay on the

surface. "As you say, Amy might go with her, and I would run down for a Sunday; but since I have no partner, I cannot be away from my business for many days at a time."

"I would gladly take Eva to the sea-side myself," said Lady Cecilia, "but Mr. Wray never likes to leave home; and besides, it would throw out my nephew's plans, since he has arranged to stay with us for another six weeks."

Lady Cecilia imparted this last piece of information in an ingenuous tone which disarmed all Mr. Mertoun's suspicions. In urging Eva's removal from the neighbourhood while Lord Alan continued to reside at the Hollies, she proved that she had relinquished any scheme she had entertained of promoting the intimacy, if indeed Mr. Mertoun had not wronged her in such a belief. His brow cleared, and he said with real friendliness, "It is very good of you, Lady Cecilia, to take such an interest in my little girl. I am less at home than I could wish, and it is true that I might not be the first to notice any failure of health or spirits. I will talk over the matter with her and Amy when I go home this evening, and I will send them off to Swanage if I see any occasion for it."

Lady Cecilia would not trespass any longer on Mr. Mertoun's valuable time, and took leave of him satisfied that she had set the stone rolling and that her nephew would be deprived of the pastime in which he had chosen to employ the long summer days.

Eva's sad eyes brightened when her father came home prepared with his scheme for sending her from home. There is no tread-mill more wearisome than the round of gaieties which demand a smile upon the lips when the spirits are flagging and the heart is sore; and to escape from such servitude to the little watering-place, where she might be as silent and unsocial as she pleased, was a welcome prospect. But the "little rift" which severed her from her cousin was slowly widening, and she could not endure the thought of constant and close companionship, when there would be no third person present to lessen the constraint. "If you can get on without us, papa," she said, "I really think that a month at Swanage would do me good, but it would be dull for Amy unless I may ask Helen to come with us. They might take long walks together when I am only fit to sit on the shore, and I should enjoy giving Helen the thorough rest and holiday. I know from Mr. O'Brien, even more than from what Amy has told me, how hard-worked she is at home."

"Settle it as you like," said Mr. Mertoun, not altogether pleased, "I see that you are determined that I shall adopt the whole family. Here is young Richard coming into the office next week, and I suppose that you will soon find niches for the rest. I can see the attraction to a pretty, sensible girl like Amy, but this other sister has always appeared to me singularly deficient in outward graces."

"She is at the awkward age," said Eva, "but there

is something honest and downright in her, something on which I feel that I could fall back in any trouble."

"And what trouble do you anticipate?" said Mr. Mertoun, looking at her keenly.

"Nothing very serious," said Eva, smiling, "but there are times when my head aches and my limbs tremble, and when the trouble of living seems almost too great."

"A girl's nervous fancies; you certainly want change of air," said Mr. Mertoun hurriedly. "And you may take Helen if you like. A parcel of girls together: you will be apt to get into mischief, but I shall send Misbourne to look after you." Misbourne was the old housekeeper who had ruled at Leasowes in Eva's childhood, and with whom Eva now shared a divided empire.

When Amy learned that the sentence had gone forth that they were to leave Leasowes for Swanage in the course of the ensuing week, her countenance expressed none of the discomfiture she felt, but she ventured to ask in a slightly injured tone whether it were not rather early for the sea-side. "At this time of year," she said, "I fancy that the place must be given up to nursery-maids and children."

"Swanage is not a gay and fashionable place at any time of year," said Eva. "There is nothing so detestable as sea-side gaieties. The days may be too glaring for us to go out much, but I shall enjoy the long summer evenings on the shore, and the release from housekeeping cares, and the privilege of wearing

shabby clothes. I hope that you will not dislike it very much."

"Of course not, Eva, I think it will be delightful," said Amy, not with enthusiasm. "But if you can carry out your idea of taking Helen, would it not be well for me to stay and keep house for Uncle Richard? He will be very uncomfortable without you or Misbourne to look after him, and I might be of some use to Dick in his first independent start in life, while it is near enough to Allerton to make Helen easy about leaving mamma."

"The last will be only a sentimental advantage, unless you migrate to Allerton for the time I am away," said Eva, with the slightest shade of *aigreur* in her tone. "The distance is too great for constant intercourse, and you know that you have not been over once since you came to Leasowes. I am quite sure that Papa will not let you sacrifice yourself to his comfort, since I often leave him in this way, though not often so early in the year. He rather enjoys his bachelor life, and says that he gets through twice as much work as when I am at home. He dines out among the Bixley people, and once in a fortnight or so he runs down to spend a Sunday with me. He would be rather oppressed if he felt himself responsible for your amusement."

"I only wished to be of use. If it would bore Uncle Richard, of course I would much rather be with you," said Amy. The suggestion of even a temporary return to Allerton, seemed to her sensitive

imagination to imply a threat of her eternal exile from Leasowes and all its advantages, and nothing short of unconditional submission might save her from such a fate. She declared herself as ready to go to Swanage as to promote the scheme of adding Helen to her party, although there was in fact little in the note which she appended to Eva's letter on the subject, beyond an expression of self-gratulation over the benefits which the benign influence of her presence at Leasowes had procured for the other members of her family.

CHAPTER X.

Helen's Holiday.

"O MY prophetic soul!" exclaimed Helen, as she ran her eye over the two letters which her mother handed to her without a word of comment: "I always felt that Amy's promotion was only the thin end of the wedge. Dick has already been sucked into the vortex, and the rest of the family are commanded to follow."

"A confusion of metaphors, Helen," observed Henry, as he rose hastily from the breakfast-table; "I shall be too late for the bank if I stay to protest that there is no legitimate connection between wedges and whirlpools. I only stay to declare that if Leasowes is the vortex, it will find me a tough morsel to swallow."

"I am glad that Henry could not stay to bias your

decision," said Mrs. Mertoun, when the house-door had closed behind him; "I have quite set my heart on your taking a real holiday for the first time in your life."

"Have you really, mother?" replied Helen, stroking and fondling her mother's hand with a rare burst of tenderness: "I never knew you to set your heart on anything so unnatural and absurd. Do you think that I am to leave you alone to vex your soul about Dick's proceedings at Bixley, or Sarah's last piece of stupidity in the kitchen? I hope that Henry will get away for his holiday in three weeks' time, and then you and I must look forward to our annual dissipation at the Manor Farm. I met Miss Charlton in the street two days ago, and she told me that she expected us to spend a long day with her as soon as the worry of the hay harvest was off her mind."

"I shall not feel lonely, with Miss Charlton to look in now and then," persisted Mrs. Mertoun: "there is really no valid reason for refusing Eva's kindness."

"I see many reasons why we should not all become pensioners on Uncle Richard's bounty," said Helen. "I do not want to unlearn the lesson of independence which has been the best fruit of our struggling life. You know, mother, that it will take me six weeks' machine-work to balance my account with Mr. Benson for Dick's new set of shirts."

"I daresay that Benson would let that stand over until you come back."

"I dare say he would; but if he had to get some one else to do his machine-work, I should lose my connection. You need not shock Amy's gentility by bringing forward any such plebeian reasons, although I think the stitching of trimmings as little degrading as Uncle Richard's dealings in coal, corn, and timber; but write a polite refusal, full of the vague generalities which it is impossible to refute. I do not imagine that Eva really cares about my going, and if Amy had been in earnest about it, she would have testified to the fact by enclosing another pair of kid gloves."

"If you are set against the plan, Helen, it is of no use to argue the point," said Mrs. Mertoun, with a plaintive note in her voice.

"Do not worry yourself any more about it, mother," rejoined Helen, brightly, "you know in your heart that my going is out of the question; and I will write the letter of refusal myself, lest Eva should imagine that I am a victim."

The letter was, however, postponed by Helen to the exigencies of her machine, although its composition occupied her mind while she bent over her work, which was carried on in the little back parlour, in order that she might be free from interruption. Mrs. Mertoun meanwhile had a visit from the Miss Charlton of the Manor Farm, of whom mention has been made. The Charltons were substantial yeomen who had occupied their own land for many generations, and Charlton Manor was within a walk of Allerton. It

was a picturesque old tenement, its brick walls and tiled roof mellowed by the interlacing growth of moss and lichens which had been undisturbed for centuries. There was a flagged pathway up to the front door, which was not opened once in six weeks, and a back entrance through the farm and poultry yard into the tiled kitchen, in which Miss Charlton pottered about of a morning, much more at home than she appeared to be in the low-browed parlour to which she used to adjourn to receive her afternoon visitors.

Miss Charlton was a little, brisk, old lady, who wore her own grey hair with her morning print dresses, and arrayed herself in a brown front and a black silk gown, rich in quality, but short and scanty in quantity, when she went abroad or expected company at home. She kept house for her brother George, who was several years younger than herself, and had still an air of youth and comeliness about him. He was reputed to be wealthy, but their style of living was more in keeping with the customs of a bygone generation than with modern notions. They kept only two indoor servants, and would have thought it an unjustifiable extravagance to eat meat which had not been killed on the farm: but the consumption of beef and ale was great on all festive occasions, and George Charlton paid away a large sum in weekly wages to men whose chief claim to his service lay in the fact that they were too old or infirm to obtain work elsewhere, and that their fathers and grandfathers had worked on the estate before them.

Amy had always attempted to ignore the acquaintance of Miss Charlton and her brother, whom she designated as "Helen's friends," but she had not been insensible to the material advantages it offered in the frequent tokens of regard which were so often left at the door with Mr. Charlton's respectful compliments —the little loin of dairy-fed pork, the delicious cream cheeses, the fragrant strawberries or russet apples which followed in due succession. Since Amy's removal to Leasowes, intercourse with the inhabitants of the Manor Farm had been less restricted, and Miss Charlton was on sufficiently unceremonious terms to invade Helen's retreat, tapping lightly at the door when her long visit to Mrs. Mertoun came to an end. She received a cordial welcome: Helen kissed the old lady's cheek, which was at once withered and ruddy, like a shrivelled pippin; apologised, not unnecessarily, for her own fluffy appearance, and tilted a pile of work out of the only spare chair, on which she entreated Miss Charlton to make herself comfortable.

"Indeed, Miss Helen," she replied, "I have been here too long already. I sat gossipping with your dear mamma to cheer her up, for she looks nervous and low."

"Your visits always do her a world of good, Miss Charlton. She has a good many lonely hours, now that Amy is gone, and I cannot sit with her while I am at work because the noise of the machine worries her head. You bring a whiff of country air in with

you which is almost as good for her as a visit to the Manor Farm."

"You have taken the word out of my mouth," said Miss Charlton, "for I have almost persuaded Mrs. Mertoun to pay us a visit. A month in the country, on our homely fare of good cream and whey and new-laid eggs, will do her a world of good, and her only difficulty is about leaving you here."

"That difficulty is easily solved," said Helen, not unsuspicious of the attack to which Miss Charlton was diplomatically leading the way: "Henry and I can keep house together with perfect comfort and propriety."

"As if your dear mamma would consent to take her pleasure when you are as hard at work as ever. No, Miss Helen, *I* know her better than that."

"Then, Miss Charlton, you must include me in the invitation to the Manor Farm, and let one of your waggons call for the sewing-machine."

"Another time, my dear, another time. I am sure that I take it as a great compliment that you should think of putting up with our old-world ways. If Mr. Henry will condescend so far, there will be a bed for him whenever he likes to come out to the farm, but we cannot take all our visitors at once."

"Your duplicity amazes me," said Helen with mock solemnity. "Have I not played at hide and seek at the farm, through the long range of sloping attics, each furnished with its oaken press and bed with dimity hangings, where you might put up a regiment

or a boarding-school? Confess that you and mother have been intriguing against me, and that this is only a plot for sending me to Swanage against my will."

"I am not at all ashamed to confess it," said Miss Charlton stoutly: "I soon found out that your mamma was fretting over the idea that you had given up the jaunt on her account, and I wish that you could have seen her face light up as soon as I saw my way out of the difficulty. Do not vex her and disappoint me by interfering with the arrangement I propose."

"Well, I will not—at least if Henry makes no objection to my going," said Helen, and there was some heroism in the concession, since it implied the surrender of her independence: "I must hear what Henry has to say in the matter, and also Mr. Benson, and if the Fates send me to Swanage, I will try to think it pleasant. But I know that it would be much pleasanter to drink cream and make hay at the Manor Farm."

"Another time, my dear," repeated Miss Charlton, mildly triumphant in the success of her mission. "I am sure that George would be flattered to hear you say so, though he would not approve of your taste. He is a great admirer of your beautiful sister, and indeed it is quite a tender subject with him. I tell him that he does not care near so much about going into Allerton, now that there is no chance of meeting her in the street."

Helen thought with some amusement of the scorn

with which Amy would disclaim her bucolic admirer, but she was able to see the matter from Miss Charlton's point of view and to accept George Charlton's homage with gratitude, and the simple-hearted old lady remarked to her brother that evening that, though some people said that the Mertouns held their heads too high, she should always declare Miss Helen had the sweetest manner of all the girls she knew.

Mrs. Mertoun was overjoyed, Henry only slightly contemptuous, when it appeared that Helen had reconsidered her determination to decline Eva's invitation, and it was accepted accordingly, with due, but by no means extravagant, expressions of gratitude. A few busy days of preparation followed, and, on the evening before her own departure, Helen had the satisfaction of seeing her mother and Henry comfortably established at the Manor Farm. Dick had already preceded her on the journey to Bixley, too well pleased with his new outfit of clothes and his release from school tasks to feel any aversion to the more monotonous drudgery of office life, to which he must now devote himself. The house at Allerton was to be shut up, and, since it was many years since there had been so little strain on Mrs. Mertoun's slender income, Henry had acceded to O'Brien's proposal that they should start early in July, on a walking tour together in the south of England. "I hope that you will include Swanage in the programme," Helen said, more in jest than earnest, and she was surprised by Henry's ready reply, that he should like

to explore the Isle of Purbeck unless Dennis were averse to the idea. Helen began to suspect that the bitterness with which Henry had hitherto regarded his uncle Richard was modified by the interest he had begun to feel in his pale, gentle cousin. Under all the circumstances, Helen felt that she could enjoy her holiday with an easy conscience, and she set out from the deserted house at Allerton in buoyant spirits.

CHAPTER XI.

Fair and Fickle.

HELEN had taken an early train to Bixley, since there was nothing to detain her in her dismantled home and she wished to avoid travelling in the sultry heat of mid-day, so that the carriage which took Mr. Mertoun to his office met her at the station, and she found Eva and Amy lingering over their breakfast when she arrived at Leasowes.

"You have got yourself up in the most elaborate style for the sea-side," said Amy, after a critical survey of her sister's appearance: "that blue serge will be the very thing for Swanage, although it looks hot on such a day as this."

"I am glad that you approve of Mr. Benson's taste this time," said Helen, quick to resent her sister's condescending note of admiration: "the dear old man sent me the dress two days ago as a slight token of his respectful regard. He explained that it was one

of his Parisian patterns, for which he had no further occasion, and that he should be too much honoured by my acceptance of it."

"Who is Mr. Benson?" asked Eva, and, while Amy ruffled up her plumes like an offended chicken, Helen's reply was prompt.

"Mr. Benson is my friend and patron, the leading linendraper of Allerton—a little, snuffy old man, who may possibly claim my acquaintance on the sands at Swanage. As I work for him regularly, I expected him to make difficulties about my coming away, but, on the contrary, he said yesterday that every one was better for a holiday, and that he had himself thought of spending the month of August at Swanage, only Mrs. B. was more partial to Weymouth. In the course of the same evening this dress was brought in, and I am so overwhelmed with his munificence that I think of making myself a walking advertisement, and displaying the shop ticket on my sleeve."

It was undoubtedly trying to a possible, Amy might have said to a probable, Lady Alan Rae, to hear her sister blazon abroad the favours she had received from a country draper, and Amy manifested her annoyance by declaring the necessity of going to see about her packing, and declining Helen's offers of assistance.

"Tell me about Dick," said Helen, when she was alone with Eva. "We have had one letter from him, illiterate but satisfied. I hope that Uncle Richard has not discovered how badly he spells."

"He will have time to improve his spelling by a long course of copying before he is promoted to any original composition," said Eva. "He came up here the day he arrived, but he would not stay, even for a cup of tea, as he was impatient to be off to Mr. O'Brien's lodgings, and we have not seen him since."

"He will be quite safe with Dennis, safe and happy," said Helen; "Dick has a room in the same house, and I suppose that there will be nothing improper in my going there to see that his things are properly unpacked and put away."

"I suppose not," said Eva doubtfully: "Mr. O'Brien is always at the Museum at this hour."

"I was not thinking of Dennis," said Helen, with a laugh. "Only whether Mrs. Ball, the landlady, would think that I was taking a liberty. Why, when Dennis was at Allerton, he used to bring me his shirts to mend and his stockings to darn."

"Oh, if he is on such brotherly terms as that office implies, there is nothing to be said," said Eva, smiling also. "I can see no objection to your looking after Dick's comfort, and if Mrs. Ball thinks it an unwarrantable liberty we shall never know it. But it is too hot to walk, and if you can wait till after lunch I will drive you into Bixley."

"The walk is nothing," said Helen. "I went twice as far yesterday in the hottest part of the day, walking out to the Manor Farm and back."

"The farm in which Aunt Anne has arranged to board while you are away?" inquired Eva.

"That is Amy's way of stating, or misstating, a fact," said Helen, colouring. "There is no *arrangement* in the sense you mean. Mr. George Charlton and his sister made the offer, in the kindness of their hearts, putting us under an obligation which money would not repay, if we had it to give, which we have not."

"I did not mean to slight your friends," said Eva, who did not in truth understand where the offence lay.

"I know that you did not, Eva, but I was irritated by the false impression which Amy had contrived to give of their generous kindness. The truth is that Amy and I survey life from different planes, and you cannot live with such an uncongenial pair of sisters for six weeks, without being disabused of your ideal of family harmony."

"Life is a series of disillusions: one more or less cannot signify," said Eva in a tone of weariness and dissatisfaction which still rang in Helen's ears as she walked briskly down into the town.

Helen's manner, so apt to be aggressive with those whom she held to be her equals or superiors, had a frank and winning charm which found its way to the hearts of those with whom she had occasion to associate in the class below her. If Amy had glided into her brother's lodgings on a visit of inspection, Mrs. Ball might have felt disposed to resent such an unnecessary intrusion; but Helen was not kept standing on the well-worn floor-cloth in the passage for more

than two minutes before she and the landlady were on the most cordial terms, and she was ushered into Mr. Richard's little attic bedroom, while Mrs. Ball declared her intention of acting a mother's part to him in the matter of shirt-buttons. Helen was emboldened to relieve the desolate bareness of the room by arranging her brother's few possessions in more orderly fashion, and Mrs. Ball stood by meanwhile, with something also to say of her other lodger, Mr. O'Brien.—"The most regular, civillest-spoken young gentleman that ever I had in the house, Miss Mertoun. I have lived in high families, and I know a gentleman when I see him, and so I put up with his messes of bottles and old stones and things, though goodness knows the use of such rubbish except to harbour dust. And if he had been Master Richard's own brother, he could not have taken him up shorter for sitting down to tea without washing his hands."

"Between you and Mr. O'Brien, Master Richard ought to know when he is well off," said Helen. "Do, Mrs. Ball, make him understand that he must not spatter ink over the wristbands of more than one shirt a week, and discourage the practice of sticking his pen behind his ear, until he has learned to keep it there. I imagine that great blot on his shirt-collar is due to his ambition to acquire the clerk-like art of carrying a pen."

"Law! Miss Mertoun, boys will be boys," said Mrs. Ball sententiously, and when Helen had agreed to the axiom with the solemnity it demanded, she felt

that her mission was fulfilled, and that she might wish Mrs. Ball good morning. She did not, however, at once retrace her steps to Leasowes, but acted on the half-formed intention which had influenced her desire to visit Bixley independently, and she turned into the street which led to the Museum. "A free day," she remarked to herself, after a glance at the notice-board. "That is lucky, considering the state of my finances, although I should not think sixpence an exorbitant price to pay for a few minutes' talk with Dennis."

It was the dinner-hour at Bixley, and, with the exception of two or three artisans who had strolled in on their way from work, the rooms were empty. Helen walked on, glancing in a cursory manner at the rows of glass cases, until she reached the closed door of a room which was labelled private, and, after only a moment's hesitation, she knocked, and Dennis O'Brien answered the summons.

"Why, Helen," he said, a little scandalized, "have you come all alone to invade my domain? Dick told me that you were expected at Leasowes to-day."

"With whom should I come, Dennis? Dick is at the office, and I did not suppose you would wish me to bring Amy."

"I did not imagine that Amy would be brought," said Dennis. "But I am very glad to see you, and you shall tell me the Allerton news while we take a turn through the Museum."

"I must not stay five minutes, as I shall be late

for luncheon, but I wanted to talk to you about Dick, and also to ask what you say to this Swanage scheme. Of course you think me a great fool for going?"

"No, I do not, Helen. I was rather surprised when Dick told me, but I am glad that you agreed to go. It may prevent your sister from drifting altogether away from the old moorings."

"On the contrary," said Helen, "I am convinced that Amy never sees me without feeling a more imperative necessity for breaking away from the life she despises. I get on better with Eva, but I do not expect to be on familiar terms with anything but the algæ and actiniæ until I come home again. I look forward to their nearer acquaintance with the most lively interest, and one of my objects in coming here to-day was to ask for the name of some good, cheap, exhaustive manual, since I intend to live on the rocks."

Here the talk became technical, but it insensibly drifted back to matters of human interest. "I have encountered the Leasowes party several times," said Dennis: "they came in here one day, incited, as I believe, by Lord Alan Rae, who was with them, and he called me out of my den, as you did just now, to answer some question of your sister's about a fossil. I could see that Amy did not like it."

"Perhaps you liked it still worse, Dennis," said Helen, looking at him anxiously.

"I am growing callous to that sort of thing," said O'Brien, although the working of his mobile features

belied his professions of insensibility; "people say that her engagement to Lord Alan Rae may be declared any day."

"Then people talk nonsense, as they usually do. Amy herself told me, not a month ago, that Lord Alan wishes to marry Eva."

Before O'Brien could declare his reasons for a different belief, the discussion was cut short by the appearance of Lord Alan himself, who had just entered the room. He came up to speak to O'Brien, and it cost him the effort of a moment's recollection to recognise in Helen the third Miss Mertoun, but nothing could be more cordial than his greeting when the effort was successful. "Forgive my hesitation," he said, "since I could not expect to see you in Bixley. I have been absent from the Hollies for a day or two and have only learned on my return, very much to my regret, that Leasowes is deserted. Pray tell your sister, when you write, how much I regret that I did not see her again."

"I will give your message by word of mouth," said Helen: "I sleep at Leasowes to-night and go with my sister and cousin to Swanage to-morrow."

A gleam of satisfaction, not unmingled with anger, lighted up Lord Alan's handsome features. "I was misled by Lady Cecilia," he said: "but I shall not miss the opportunity of paying a farewell visit to Leasowes. I hoped to have found you at leisure for a scientific talk," he added, turning to O'Brien, "but that is a pleasure which may be deferred, as I might

possibly fail to see the Miss Mertouns if I call too late."

"You will find me here at any time, Lord Alan," replied Dennis, with formal courtesy of manner.

"I must go too," said Helen, less confident than before that Dennis was mistaken in the object of Lord Alan's frequent visits to Leasowes: "I shall be late for lunch as it is. Good-bye, Dennis: give my blessing to Dick in case I do not see him this evening, and cry, Turn again, Whittington, if he betrays any backsliding from the career of commerce."

"I have my horse," said Lord Alan, as they went down the outside steps of the Museum, and he discovered that Helen was on foot: "I am afraid that I can hardly offer to keep pace with you."

"Of course not," replied Helen: "the kindest thing you can do is to ride on, and beg my cousin not to wait lunch for me. I shall be hot enough as it is," she added to herself, when Lord Alan had acted on this suggestion, "and the process of manufacturing the small talk suitable to a lord would have set my face aflame for the rest of the afternoon."

Even without this additional aggravation, Helen found it expedient to go at once to her room to efface the traces of her hot and dusty walk before taking her place at the luncheon table. Although the meal was over Eva waited for her in the dining-room, but Lord Alan and Amy had gone out to play croquet at the shady end of the garden. Helen's conviction of the unveracity of Bixley gossip was still further dis-

turbed by this combination, and she was more struck than she had been on her first arrival by the anxious and distressed expression of her cousin's face. "Pray do not wait for me, Eva," she said imploringly; "you know that this is our usual dinner-hour, and as I had an early breakfast, very much in the rough, I am quite ungenteelly hungry. Do let me forage for myself, while you sit out to watch the croquet."

"I can see quite enough of the game from the windows," said Eva, and when Helen followed the direction of her cousin's eyes, she saw that the game had not in truth begun. Lord Alan was speaking with eager animation; while Amy listened with downcast eyes, in the prettiest attitude of wrapt attention. Helen said no more, and discovered that the appetite of which she had boasted had suddenly forsaken her.

In a few minutes Amy came up to the windows: "I wanted to see whether Helen had finished luncheon," she said: "there is quite a fresh breeze under the trees and you will find it pleasant sitting there, even if you are not inclined to play croquet."

"Just as Helen likes," said Eva, indifferently.

Helen, with a determination to note, and if possible to baffle, the treachery of which she conceived her sister to be guilty, gave her voice in favour of an adjournment to the lawn. Treachery was perhaps too strong a term to apply to Amy's conduct, but a forcible vocabulary is needed to express the rash judgments of youth. Amy did what she could to depre-

cate the inference which Helen was so ready to draw, by the efforts which she made to disclaim Lord Alan's pointed attentions. She declared that it was too hot for croquet, and took the garden seat beside her cousin, while Lord Alan threw himself on the turf at her feet.

"I have been deploring the break-up of our set here," he said; "the Hollies will be intolerably dull when Leasowes is deserted, and I think of running down to Cowes next week to look at a new yacht which is for sale or hire there. She is still without a name, and I shall be glad to receive suggestions."

"The 'Vanessa' would not be a bad name for a yacht," said Helen, when Amy and Eva remained silent. If she had expected the name to implant a thorn in her sister's bosom, the attempt was a failure. It did not occur to Amy that Dennis O'Brien had ever likened her to a Painted-lady butterfly, and she was equally unconscious that Vanessa was its scientific equivalent.

"The 'Vanessa' let it be," said Lord Alan. "Look out for the name in the yachting intelligence, and when you see that she is lying at Lymington or Weymouth, you may expect the first favourable wind to bring her into Swanage Bay." He spoke generally, but two at least of his hearers knew for whom the information was specially intended; and, while Eva listened with a tightening of the heart, Amy exulted in such a proof of the futility of the machinations which had been devised to estrange her from her noble lover.

CHAPTER XII.

The Butterfly-net.

Two days later the three girls had settled down to the life of laborious idleness incident to a temporary residence in sea-side lodgings. Amy enjoyed the pre-eminence of being the prettiest and the best-dressed young lady visitor of the season, and she exhibited her new costumes upon the pier or as she sauntered along the cliffs which fringe the coast. Eva sat chiefly on the shore, taking a languid interest in the children who frequented the sands, and cementing a friendship with the most attractive among them by offerings of chocolate bonbons. Helen presented as strong a contrast to one of her companions in the homeliness of her attire, as she did to the other in her superabundant energy. The glory of Mr. Benson's present was soon tarnished by her reckless scrambles over slippery sea-weed in her pursuit after natural curiosities, heedless of the rock-pools in which her skirts were draggled, as well as of the white dust of the stone quarries. Nothing came amiss to her in her zeal as a collector, and the patience of their landlady was sorely tried when the sill of every window was beset with stones and fossils, when ribands of sea-weed dangled from the hat-pegs in the hall, and the parlour was furnished with earthen pans filled with sea-water and its marine inhabitants.

Before Amy awoke from her first sleep, Helen had walked to Tilly Whim to see the sun-rise; had groped among the rocks for some addition to her assortment of sea-monsters, and had been amongst the earliest bathers in the bay. From such expeditions she would return with a glow of health and spirits, and too clamorous an appetite for breakfast to enter into Eva's critical remarks on the quality of the bread or the flavour of the butter. Her boots and gloves were reduced to the consistency of pulp by the hard usage to which she subjected them, and Amy remonstrated with her in vain on the want of foresight with which she allowed her slender store of pocket-money to melt away in the purchase of manuals of marine zoology which she read voraciously, and generally discovered to be worthless, while the various necessities of her toilette remained unsupplied.

If Amy was annoyed by her sister's lawless and unconventional habits, which threatened to bring discredit on the firm, Eva took a more tolerant view of Helen's peculiarities, and noted with a pleased eye the bronzed and ruddy colour which soon tanned the cheek that had become sallow under the influence of a sedentary life. She was anxious to put the largest possible amount of pleasure into Helen's brief holiday, and was always willing to take a carriage to explore the surrounding country; but the weather was still sultry, and it was agreed to defer any more distant expeditions until Henry Mertoun should make his appearance. The scheme for his tour with Dennis

O'Brien began to take shape soon after their arrival at Swanage; and he wrote that the Isle of Purbeck was to be their destination, since Dennis considered that it would be a profitable field both for sketching and entomology. Dennis proposed to give some days to the sketching of Corfe Castle, and Henry would avail himself of their halt there to come over to see his sisters. Helen was only half-satisfied: she could see Henry at Allerton, and had a much greater desire for O'Brien's sympathy and assistance in her marauding excursions on the sea-shore; but they all felt that the masculine element could be introduced into their narrow circle with advantage, and looked forward to Henry's coming as to an era.

The days lengthened into weeks, and Amy had seen the white sails of several yachts furled in Swanage Bay with a quickening hope, which faded again in disappointment when she learned the names of their owners. The "Vanessa" came not, and it was Henry's arrival which made the first break in the monotony of their life. He walked in one afternoon, dusty and travel-worn, but full of enjoyment, and declaring Dennis to be the most genial and intelligent of travelling companions, with an emphasis which was plainly designed for Amy's benefit.

"I do not doubt it," said Helen; "there are a hundred things I want to ask him if he would only come here."

"I doubt if he will do that," replied Henry, "but I think that he will receive you graciously if you are

disposed to act Mahomet's part. Have you seen Corfe Castle?"

"We have seen nothing," said Eva, "because we waited for you to take us about. Let us order a carriage and drive over early to-morrow to spend a long day among the ruins."

"An ingenious way of introducing Henry to the beauties of Swanage," remarked Amy, who never went willingly out of sight of the quay.

"Its beauties are soon seen," replied Henry; "it is a stony aggregation of small houses, and awakens no desire for more intimate acquaintance."

"Besides," added Helen, "Henry will come back with us to-morrow night, and stay here as long as Dennis is at Corfe Castle. In spite of his disparaging remark, he will allow that the place has sketching capabilities when he has walked round the coast with me. We might take a turn before breakfast."

"Thank you," said Henry with a laugh; "I have come here for a little respite from O'Brien's unflagging energy in sight-seeing, and will not fall a prey to your merciless strength. Eva has already described the limits of your morning stroll, and cart-ropes will not draw me out before breakfast. But we will go together to bespeak my bed at the inn, and then perhaps walk up to the best point of view for the sunset."

Henry set out with both his sisters, but Amy was not prepared to accompany him even for this limited distance; and, as they retraced their steps from the

inn, she declared her intention of turning on to the wooden jetty to await the arrival of the Poole steamer. "Such a misguided thing to do," remarked Helen, as she and her brother ascended the hill; "Amy takes the deepest interest in the arrival of that steamer, which she considers to be our only link with the civilised world." Helen spoke at random and with no prevision of the links in which passing events were even now welding the chain of Amy's fate.

The "Royal Albert" was discharging its passengers when Amy walked down the pier, and she did not feel any lively interest in the two middle-aged spinsters in blue veils who were obstinately resisting the blandishments of the boatmen who proposed to relieve them of their loose parcels; nor yet in the careworn father of a family, as he stood still to count over his property, which consisted of boxes of every shape and size, a bath, a perambulator and a baby, not to mention two pale-faced girls, and a miniature sailor who considered his wooden spade and pail the only important articles in the miscellaneous pile. These were the objects which first met Amy's view, and she regarded them with a languid amusement which was lost in a very different feeling when she caught sight of a tall, fair young man, in a yachting dress, who was crossing the gangway. Their eyes met, on his side with a smile of animated pleasure, on hers with a blush of rosy red, and before his foot touched the pier Amy had turned away with an instinctive desire not to court recognition. She had gone but a few

paces before she became conscious that Lord Alan was by her side.

"Do you run away from me?" he asked, in a low breathless voice.

"It looked as if I had come to meet you," replied Amy with downcast eyes.

"May I hope that you have so come? If I am not ashamed to say that I have come a hundred miles in the hope of seeing you again, you need not grudge me a poor hundred yards."

"I began to think that you would not come at all," said Amy, no longer attempting to conceal the fact that she had in truth watched and waited for him.

"The time has seemed long to me also, Miss Mertoun, although I have not been idle. As soon as I had completed my purchase of the 'Vanessa,' I ran down to Cowes, first to collect my crew, and then to try and make the yacht a little more worthy of the precious freight she is to carry. My arrangements were only concluded yesterday, and, when the wind dropped this afternoon before I could reach Swanage, I ran the 'Vanessa' under Branksea and boarded the steamer as she passed. I must go back by her in a quarter of an hour to sleep on board the yacht, but I shall be back with the first tide to-morrow, in time for our promised cruise."

"We have made an engagement for to-morrow," said Amy; "my cousin has arranged that we should drive to Corfe Castle."

"I was not thinking of your cousin, Miss Mertoun. Are *you* bound to be of the party?"

"They expect me to go. It will seem strange that I should stay here alone," said Amy.

"Surely you can plead a headache, fear of the heat—anything that will procure us the happiness of spending some happy hours in each other's society, unwatched by curious and grudging eyes. Or is such a prospect distasteful?"

"Not distasteful," said Amy, and her increasing embarrassment gave courage to Lord Alan's importunity.

"In all my arrangements, my one thought has been how to give you pleasure, and you are the only being whom I care to see on board the 'Vanessa.' I shall come ashore in the boat at ten to-morrow, and shall hope to find you on the south side of the quay. Come in a boating dress, for if the day be favourable you need not be afraid to take a short cruise."

"I am not afraid of the sea," said Amy.

"Still less, I hope, of me," rejoined Lord Alan, in accents of tenderest reproach. The steamboat bell was ringing its energetic signal for departure, but he still lingered at the pier gate with Amy's hand fast locked in his. Unwillingly he relinquished his grasp, and walked slowly away, with more than one backward glance, and he was gone before Amy had uttered a syllable of the reply in which she tried, or fancied that she tried, to disclaim the possibility of keeping the appointment Lord Alan had made.

Amy little thought that the parting, from which the most uninterested bystander could read something of tender sentiment, had flashed its full meaning before the indignant eyes of Eva. She had stepped out to make some necessary purchases for to-morrow's picnic, and was passing the gate at the moment when Lord Alan turned away; she could not be mistaken in her cousin, and a second glance was scarcely needed to identify her companion. Eva turned pale and hurried on, whilst Amy retraced her steps to the house, unconscious of the recognition.

At the tea-table that evening, when Helen and her brother were discussing some point of history in connection with Corfe Castle, Amy announced her intention not to join the party. "On thinking over the matter," she said, "I have decided not to go with you. There is no need to make a mystery of the fact that Dennis and I are not on easy terms together, and our mutual constraint might spoil the pleasure of the rest."

"Dennis ought to feel flattered by such consideration for his feelings," remarked Henry, "and yet I fancy that he might endure some hours in your society without any very acute suffering."

"Very possibly," said Amy colouring, "but still we may be happier apart, and I shall enjoy a quiet day upon the sands."

"It is a long day to spend *alone*," said Eva, with a stress on the last word, intended to mark her sense of her cousin's duplicity; but the shaft fell short, since

Amy was still unconscious of the chance which had revealed her stolen interview with Lord Alan.

"I must observe that I shall get more good out of Dennis if Amy is not there," said Helen, "and I do not feel heroic enough to give up the day's pleasuring on her account. Do let us go, Eva, and enjoy ourselves without any qualms of conscience."

"My conscience is clear," said Eva, with a peculiar smile, which puzzled Helen, while it altogether escaped Amy's notice. She was satisfied to have the matter arranged with so little trouble, and sat working in silence and with a pre-occupied mind.

Henry talked of Dick's start in the office at Bixley, and Eva was gratified by his frank acknowledgment of Mr. Mertoun's great kindness to him. "The Charltons invited Dick to spend a Sunday with us at the farm," he said, "and I thought him improved, more manly and intelligent, and interested in his work. He went back on Monday to dine at Leasowes, an invitation by which he was flattered, though awe-struck."

"Poor Dick *tête-à-tête* with Uncle Richard!" exclaimed Helen: "how stupid Uncle Richard must have thought him!"

"I suspect that his uncle may be more tolerant of dulness than his sister," said Eva.

"Very possibly: I know that Henry and I are both intolerant," replied Helen: "the truth is, that as we do not mix with people to see them as they are, we

have leisure to construct the ideal of what they ought to be."

"A philosophic excuse for fastidiousness," observed Henry with a smile.

Helen had never seen her brother in such happy and natural spirits, and doubted whether to ascribe the fact to O'Brien's genial influence, or that the sense of injury which had so long rankled in his breast, embittering his relations with his uncle Richard, was effaced by an awakening interest in his cousin. Although sometimes provoked by Eva's variable spirits, and her fits of languor and depression, the two girls had learned to love each other in the close intimacy of the last three weeks, and Helen found some amusement in weaving a romance between the Romeo and Juliet of the rival houses. At present, however, the courtship could only be suspected by a very lively imagination, for Eva was gentle and indifferent, and Henry's native roughness of manner was but little softened in her favour.

Although Helen was the only one of the party who felt any unwillingness to anticipate the usual hour of bedtime, it was Helen again who was first wrapped in sleep. Amy and Eva occupied two little chambers opening into each other, and long after the door of communication had been closed between them, Eva could see the light of her cousin's candle shining under it, and could hear Amy moving softly about. Amy could not, or at all events did not, account to herself for the restlessness which prompted

her to put all her possessions in perfect order that night. She looked over the contents of her desk and took out a little packet, containing one or two notes from Dennis, and some songs which he had copied for her; and, as she set a light to the papers in the empty grate, and watched the flame die away in a smouldering heap of ashes, Amy felt that she had in truth taken leave of her old life, and was prepared to face the future, which was opening before her. When, at last, she went to bed she found it possible to sleep peacefully through the grey dawn of the summer's morning, while Eva lay watching it with worn and sleepless eyes, and tried to school her rebellious heart into the conviction that the friend who had betrayed and the lover who had deceived her were alike unworthy of regret.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Capture.

The morning was still grey when the young people met again at an early breakfast, but this, as Henry observed, would be an advantage for their drive, and he was confident that the clouds would clear away, and the sun shine forth to gild the ruins of Corfe Castle. While the other two were too eager in their preparations to notice that anything was amiss, Amy observed that Eva was pale and silent, and followed

her upstairs to ask whether she were quite fit for the long day's expedition.

There was a suppressed fierceness in the tone of Eva's reply which was strangely at variance with her habitual gentleness of manner. "Do you really wish me to stay at home, Amy?"

"O no, dear Eva; I mean, not on my account," said Amy, annoyed by the consciousness of rising colour: "but I thought you looked ill, and I promised Uncle Richard that I would take care of you."

"I mean to go," said Eva, shortly, and Amy, conscious of a disinterested motive in her suggestion, and of considerable relief in its rejection, turned into Helen's room with a virtuous sense of her own heroism in having attempted—and failed—to interfere with Lord Alan's scheme for their mutual enjoyment. She found Helen in the highest spirits, as she collected the implements for her day's pleasuring, which included on this occasion a geological hammer and chisel, a tin case for botanical purposes, and a butterfly net and beetle-box. Amy wished to add a sun-shade to this miscellaneous baggage, but Helen rejected the suggestion with scorn.

"For the good of my complexion, Amy? You know very well that I parted with that superfluous article the day after we got here, and I do not miss it in the least. You must come with us if the party is to wear any air of distinction, and it is not too late to think better of it." But Amy considered

that it was too late, and the carriage drove off without her.

When Misbourne came to inquire at what hour she would be pleased to dine, Amy replied that she intended to take some biscuits and spend the day on the beach, and that most probably she should require nothing else until the rest of the party returned from Corfe Castle. Such Spartan fare was more in accordance with Helen's tastes and habits than with her sister's, but Misbourne was on ceremonious terms with "Miss Amy" and made no comment on the fact, and Amy, although she told herself that she had quite made up her mind to decline Lord Alan's proposal of a cruise in his yacht more resolutely than she had done on the preceding evening, went upstairs and exchanged her light summer cambric for a boating dress before she repaired to the beach.

She established herself in the shade of a boat near the jetty, but the light and variable wind on which Lord Alan's movements must depend, rendered him more tardy in his appearance, and Amy had leisure for some anxious surmises while she bent over her lace-work, and fancied that the nursery-maids in her neighbourhood would guess her motive if she scanned the horizon too closely. Towards noon, as the weather-wise had predicted, the clouds rolled off, a fresh breeze sprang up, and Amy presently descried the white sails of the "Vanessa," as she rounded the point, and glided gracefully into the bay. When the yacht lay to, her boat was manned to bring her owner

to the shore, and Lord Alan's eager glance soon fell on Amy, who sat as motionless as if she wished to elude observation.

"You have not come to meet me this time, Amy," said he smiling. It was the first time that he had dropped the more formal appellation, and although Amy's womanly instinct told her that no explanation had passed between them to justify such an advance, she ventured on no protest.

"You are prepared for our cruise, I see," continued Lord Alan, "and we had better go on board at once, while the wind serves for sailing."

"I have been thinking," said Amy, "that it would be better to put off our cruise until to-morrow, and wander along the cliffs this morning. Helen is fond of sailing, and she and my brother Henry would both enjoy going with you."

"Have I left the Hollies for the pleasure of taking your brother and sister out yachting?" said Lord Alan, with a shade of haughtiness in his tone: "must I say it yet again, Amy? It is for you, and you alone that all my arrangements were made, and since my company is distasteful to you, I will go back as I came."

The tears stood in Amy's beautiful eyes as she looked up with a mute beseeching glance, ready to yield, and yet trembling, as if the full meaning of the step which she was about to take dawned upon her. "For an hour, or two hours at the most, I will go with

you," she faltered, and Alan Rae accepted the concession with gratitude and renewed tenderness.

"Nay, Amy; I have frightened you by my hasty words. You shall not stay on board an hour nor a minute longer than it seems good to you, but you must give your own orders to the sailing master, since I can take no note of time whilst you are by my side. And you must come at once while the tide serves."

Amy suffered Lord Alan to raise her from the beach, and she did not withdraw her hand, though it trembled a little, when he pressed it for a moment to his lips.

It was necessary to embark from the pier, and as they passed along it, Amy was sensible that they were a mark for curious glances from the knot of idlers who were gathered there, after the fashion of sea-side places. It was also evident that Lord Alan observed and resented the inquisition, and he waved off with a haughty air the officious help of those who wished to lend a hand in pushing off the boat. Amy breathed more freely when they were not only on board the yacht, but installed in the luxuriously fitted and airy cabin in which, as Lord Alan said, she would be more comfortable until the noon-day heat was over; and yet her composure was of short duration, since Lord Alan reclined on the cushions by her side, and whispered with the assured confidence of an accepted lover: "Mine now, Amy,—now, and for ever."

"Not Amy," she faltered, struggling even now to

express the conviction that it was not thus she should be wooed and won.

"And why not Amy—Bien-aimée—Amy to me, if to none other in the world beside. I take but what I ask: call me Alan, and the cup of my pleasure will be full." And his name was scarcely breathed through Amy's scarlet lips before a lover's kiss had repaid her compliance.

This was at high noon, and it was eight hours later when the happy, tired party returned to Swanage from Corfe Castle,—returned in triumph, as Helen considered, with Dennis O'Brien in the carriage. He had made a successful sketch of the ruins, and was not unwilling to be allured by Helen's representations of the geological wealth of the rocks and stone-quarries; and if Amy's image hovered in the back-ground as a more powerful attraction, her name was unspoken by either. Misbourne was already on the door-step, awaiting their arrival with a disturbed face, and the information that her other young lady had gone out at ten o'clock and had not returned. There had been a thunderstorm, and a squall of wind and rain, and "she hoped to goodness that Miss Amy might not be drowned, nor fallen over the cliff."

A chill of dismay fell on the hearts of all, and Henry answered roughly, as a man speaks to disclaim an over-mastering fear: "Of course you would have heard if there had been any accident. Amy has probably taken shelter somewhere from the storm, but I will go out at once to make inquiries."

"Miss Amy could not take shelter if she were out at sea," rejoined the housekeeper: "and that is what some people say, but I could not understand the rights of it."

"It is absurd to suppose that she would go out boating by herself, and you have said, Eva, that you have not a single acquaintance here."

"It is not for me to speak," said the housekeeper, after a glance at her young mistress, who seemed incapable of reply: "but some one told the landlady that she was seen to get into a boat this morning which came ashore to fetch her."

"Why should we waste time in this way?" said Dennis impatiently; "let us go in different directions to make inquiries."

The two young men were about to act on this suggestion, and Helen wondered whether she might also leave her cousin to take part in the search, when Eva laid her trembling hand on Henry's shoulder. "One word with you first," she said, and Helen drew O'Brien into the passage, that the other two might be left together.

"What is the mystery?" said Dennis, forgetting the laws of good-breeding in his fierce anxiety.

"None that I know of," said Helen, who met his troubled eyes with a steady gaze: "it must be some absurdity of Misbourne's, since she considers herself responsible for our health and morals, and she is always fussy. Certainly it is not Amy's habit to be out for so many hours, but if the storm broke here with

greater violence than it did at Corfe, and she were weather-bound at any distance from home, she might feel timid about walking home alone in the dusk."

While Helen sought to satisfy her own uneasiness as well as that of her companion by this explanation, Henry was agitated by Eva's surmise as to the true cause of his sister's disappearance. "I wanted to ask you to go to the pier first," she said: "the boatmen will be sure to know if Amy has gone out with anyone."

"With *anyone*, Eva? With whom could she go, since you say that you have no acquaintance here?"

"I said so when you first arrived. An hour later I saw Lord Alan Rae taking leave of Amy at the pier-gate, and he may have brought his yacht here."

"He *may* have brought his yacht here," repeated Henry angrily; "I can only suppose that you have connived at their clandestine meeting."

"It is not so, Henry. I may have done wrong in not telling you or Helen that I witnessed their meeting yesterday evening, but I saw it by a mere chance. I was not in Amy's confidence."

"Forgive me, Eva," said Henry, recollecting himself; "it is not easy for a man to be smooth-tongued when he has to face the possibility of his sister's disgrace and ruin. I will go at once to the pier-head, but I cannot, I dare not, tell O'Brien in what direction your fears point. For all his assumption of indifference, such a suspicion would wring his heart."

When Henry came out into the passage Dennis took his arm, saying that he would go with him.

"No, Dennis, no!" replied Henry, shaking him off; "wait here whilst I go down to the quay, I shall be back in five minutes." As the clock counts time the interval was scarcely longer, but to the three who sat looking on each other with blanched faces the pause seemed almost intolerable.

When Henry returned, any consideration for his friend was lost in overwhelming emotion. "It is true, by Heaven!" he exclaimed, "a yacht called the 'Vanessa' came into the bay this morning; the owner's name did not transpire, but the description of his appearance tallies with that of Lord Alan. He came ashore in a boat, met Amy on the beach, and took her at once on board the yacht, so that I make no doubt that the villainy was deliberately planned."

"There was a sudden change of wind, which may have prevented them from getting back," said Helen.

"The wind changed at six o'clock, just before the thunderstorm," replied Henry; "if they had intended to come back at all, they would have been anxious to do so before we returned from Corfe. I learned from the boatmen that the 'Vanessa' is a large new yacht; she came from Cowes yesterday, and stood across for the Needles on leaving the bay as if to go down the Solent again."

There was a little murmur, a sort of stifled sigh from Eva, and Helen turned round to see that she had fainted. "You had better go away," said Helen

quickly; "send Misbourne to me, and I will join you presently." Misbourne came, but the young men seemed unwilling to leave the room until a faint tinge of colour, and the tears which welled from beneath her closed eyelids, betrayed that Eva's consciousness was returning.

"We will walk up and down outside, until we have decided what to do," whispered Henry; "tell Eva that I blame her in nothing; I fancy that I spoke roughly to her just now."

It was a dark, cloudy evening, and in the gathering twilight which veiled the working of his features, Dennis found it more easy to declare his purpose. "There is but one thing to be done," he said, "let us go back to catch the mail train at Wareham. One of us must go to Portsmouth, and from thence to all the yacht stations in the Solent; the other to London, in case he has decided to go there, or to Scotland."

"You, Dennis, will *you* go in pursuit of her?" said Henry.

"And why not?" he replied. "Do you think that I can bear to sit with folded hands while it may still be possible to avert dishonour from the name of the woman I have loved?"

"I will go to Portsmouth," said Henry, after a pause; "since the yacht is new, and just fitted for sea, I suspect that it has been part of his infernal scheme to keep her on board until her ruin was complete. It is well that you are a man, Dennis, and can

find relief in action. You see what the shock has done for Eva, and I feel as if it might kill my mother when she comes to hear of it."

CHAPTER XIV.

Apples of Sodom.

HENRY MERTOUN had done Alan Rae some injustice when he imputed to him a deliberate plan for Amy's ruin. He had formed no such plan, but he abandoned himself to the gratification of the moment without suffering it to be alloyed by any foreshadowing of evil consequences. For a brief space it appeared to Amy that her anticipations were fully realised, and that every hour was bringing her nearer to the brilliant and successful marriage which had been the object of her ambition. The little vessel danced gaily over the waves, and Lord Alan was constantly by her side, whispering those tender nothings in which passion first finds expression, evincing the tenderest solicitude for her comfort, and drawing her attention to arrangements which had been planned, as he often repeated, expressly with a view to her accommodation. Yet misgivings began to arise in Amy's breast, when it appeared that his entire satisfaction in the present left no room for any consideration for the future; and it cost her an effort to respond with a smile to the remark that Lady Cecilia had been successfully blinded by her nephew's intima-

tion of his purpose to spend a few weeks in yachting with a "companion." It was a designation which grated on Amy's ear.

"Where are we going?" she asked presently.

"Nowhere in particular. We are about three hours out from Swanage, and it may take us twice as long to beat back again."

"Then it will be dark, and the rest of my party will have returned from Corfe Castle," said Amy, turning pale.

"Very possibly. If they take their pleasure, why should not we?" said Lord Alan, gaily. But when he saw Amy's eyes fill with tears, he turned away with a whistle of annoyance, and said that he would go and talk to the sailing master. He was absent for some minutes, which gave Amy time to recover her composure, and to resolve to be pleased with his decree, whatever it might be.

"Berridge says that we cannot possibly get back to Swanage to-night," said he; "wind and tide are both against us, and there is a storm coming up."

"What are we to do?" replied Amy with a sinking heart.

Alan thrust his hands into his pockets and looked out of the cabin windows, as he answered with a more successful assumption of indifference: "What can we do, but spend the night on board, after running in for shelter somewhere?"

"Oh, Alan," said Amy, bursting into tears, and hiding her face in her hands. He took her in his

arms and soothed her with the tenderest reproaches, wilfully mistaking the cause of her distress.

"So easily frightened by the mention of a storm, my love! Only this morning you declared that you could live on the sea, and to-morrow your nautical fervour will revive with the sunshine. If you anticipate trouble in returning to Swanage, let us give up the idea of returning at all. We will take a maid on board at Portsmouth, with everything which is necessary for your comfort, and run across the channel to Cherbourg or Dieppe."

Before Amy could even attempt a reply, a distant roll of thunder, a flutter and rustle of wind, and the large drops which specked the white deck, heralded the approaching storm. Lord Alan, who had already taken her below, was unable to remain with her, since the wind had chopped round to the east, and he felt that his presence was necessary on deck in the confusion incident to a sudden shifting of the sails. Amy was left alone, feeling a little sea-sick, and very frightened and miserable. As the peals of thunder rolled nearer and one bright flash of lightning illumined the cabin with its lurid glare, her terror became almost uncontrollable, and it was in this pitiable state that Lord Alan found her when his services were no longer required on deck. He wished to be tender, but there was a touch of annoyance in his attempts to reassure her.

"Amy, my dear love, look up, and remember that no harm can happen to you whilst I am by your side.

The thunder-storm is nothing, and will roll off in half-an-hour, but since the change of wind must prevent our getting further to-night, I propose to run into Lymington or Yarmouth."

"Oh, I am so thankful!" exclaimed Amy, looking up in sudden relief. "Let us go to Lymington. I cannot stay in the yacht. I must go back to Swanage to-night."

"To get back to Swanage to-night is out of the question," said Lord Alan shortly. "Consider its distance from any railway-station, and it may be nine or ten o'clock before we get up to Lymington. To-morrow, if you will—"

"To-morrow will be too late," said Amy, with a fresh burst of tears. "I shall not dare to meet Henry."

Lord Alan made no reply until a louder clap of thunder brought on another access of terror, and when Amy uttered a scream, he laid his hand heavily upon her shoulder: "Control yourself, Amy, for your own sake, if not for mine; remember that in a small vessel like this everything is heard, and let us avoid a scandal if possible. I will do anything in reason to satisfy you."

Amy checked her sobs, and looked up with the pretty, pouting wilfulness of a petted child. "You must not be unkind to me, Alan. Set me on shore, and I will find my own way home."

"And you call that request reasonable, Amy? Do you propose to spend the night alone on the mud

shores of the estuary? In a few minutes the storm will be over, and then you will smile at your own fears, and allow that now and always I am to think and act for you. The tide will soon carry us up to Lymington, where we shall be under shelter; but I think it will be best to remain on board the yacht, since there is no hotel fit for your accommodation."

"I do not want to go to the hotel," said Amy. "If we cannot get back to Swanage, we may at any rate go on—on to London."

"And why to London?" said Lord Alan, fixing his eyes upon her for a moment, and then turning away, as if unwilling to read in her imploring gaze the desperate hope to which she clung, that even yet her good name might be saved by a hasty marriage.

"We will go to London, if you wish it," he said at last. In the unreasonable state of mind to which Amy's terrors had reduced her, he felt that any attempt to urge her further to entertain his suggestion of remaining on board the yacht might cause a scandal, which he wished to avoid. He was annoyed, and at little pains to conceal his annoyance; but, with the morning light and the facility for escaping the eyes of the world, which could be better attained in a great city than elsewhere, he felt confident that she would acquiesce submissively in whatever he might decree, and what that decree was to be he would not now pause to decide.

Dennis O'Brien got out of the mail-train at Brockenhurst, and, since the night was dark and rainy,

and he had travelled in the last carriage, the two shrouded figures who hurried into a reserved compartment in the fore-part of the train escaped his notice. He went into the office to inquire whether any passengers had booked from Lymington or Brockenhurst by this or by the preceding train; and, since the booking clerk was short and surly in his answers, as men are apt to be in the small hours of the night, the train moved on before he obtained the information which he sought. "A lady and gentleman," repeated the clerk; "how should I know whether it were a lady? A gentleman telegraphed from Lymington for a reserved carriage, and drove up just in time to catch the train—a tall gentleman in a pea-jacket, and he and they booked for London and went on by this very train."

A few more inquiries satisfied O'Brien that he was on the right track; and he looked hopelessly at the two red lights of the receding train, and chafed through the chill and weary hours which elapsed before he could again start in pursuit of the fugitives.

Amy snatched an hour's troubled slumber while she sat by her lover's side; and when she opened her eyes to see the summer sunrise flooding the landscape with rosy light, and to hear Lord Alan's renewed expressions of devoted attachment, her scruples and misgivings seemed to have fled with the darkness. She made no further inquiries as to their destination, and Lord Alan directed the driver of the cab which

he hailed on their arrival at Waterloo, to take them to the Charing Cross hotel.

"You require some hours' rest after all this hurry and agitation," he said: "I will order a room for you, and when we meet at breakfast or luncheon, as the case may be, it will be time enough to decide on our future plans."

Amy acquiesced in this arrangement with gentle submission, and when she was shown into a bedroom adjoining the private sitting-room, in which Lord Alan said that he should be found whenever she required him, she threw herself on the bed, and slept like a tired child. Three hours afterwards, she re-appeared, refreshed by a sound sleep, and by such toilette as was possible in her destitute condition, but she still looked pale and heavy-eyed, and her composure was easily upset. Lord Alan rang for breakfast, and ordered a cutlet.

"Cutlets, my lord?" said the glib waiter: "yes, my lord, and for her ladyship likewise?"

"Cutlets for two," replied Lord Alan stiffly, adding by way of comment as soon as the door was closed: "Officious beast! I suppose that he has been studying the engraved plate on my dressing-case."

Amy walked to the window, without attempting to reply, and when Alan constrained her with gentle force to turn her face towards him, he saw that it was covered with tears. "My timid, shrinking love," he said, "why should the mistake distress you? The

man has only ante-dated a title of which you shall have no cause to feel ashamed."

"It is foolish of me," said Amy, smiling now at the vague assurance which made her heart flutter with renewed hope.

"The night journey has made you nervous," resumed Lord Alan: "after breakfast you will take a more reasonable view of life, and then I hope to charm away all your fears of the sea. Once again on board the yacht, which is to be in readiness for us at Cowes, you will be safe from any annoyance." Amy's heart sank again, and all Lord Alan's tender watchfulness for her comfort and his repeated assurances that the joy of her presence gave a new charm to life, failed to restore her cheerfulness.

Breakfast was scarcely over, when the waiter brought in a card: "A gentleman wishing to speak with you, my lord."

"Bid him wait: I will see him by-and-by in the coffee-room," said Lord Alan, putting the card from him with a haughty gesture.

"Henry," gasped Amy, turning pale as death.

"No, my dear love, not your brother. He may conceive himself entitled to see you, although I do not allow that any man on earth has the right to interfere between us; but this is a message from young O'Brien, and if I see him at all, it will be to demand an account of his impertinent intrusion. Meanwhile, let him wait." But, as he spoke, a knock at the door was followed by O'Brien's entrance, and Lord Alan started

up in fierce anger. "Probably, sir, you are not aware that this is a private room."

"I am aware of it, Lord Alan," said Dennis, standing his ground firmly, although scarcely able to master his emotion when his eyes fell on Amy's shrinking form: "it appears to me that a private room is best adapted for such an interview as this must be. I shall not detain you long; I will not detain you at all, if Miss Mertoun is prepared to return with me to her friends."

Amy turned her head away, as she sank down on the sofa, trembling and speechless; and Lord Alan held her hand in a grasp which trembled also with suppressed fury.

"Address yourself to me, sir, if you must speak at all," he said: "I must first learn the pretext for your unwelcome intrusion. Do you claim the rights of a discarded lover?"

"I claim no interest in the matter, except as her brother's friend," said Dennis, and the words sounded strangely cold, as they fell from his pale lips: "Henry Mertoun empowered me to act for him, if I were the first to light upon the right track. No doubt he will start for London as soon as he receives the telegram I have just despatched, but in the meantime I am prepared to take Miss Mertoun to her mother's house."

"Miss Mertoun can dispense with your services, Mr. O'Brien. Speak to him, Amy, assure him that your choice is made, that you have cast in your lot to live and die with one who truly loves you."

Amy's lips moved without uttering a sound, but the gesture with which she clung to Alan Rae's arm, and hid her face on his shoulder was significant enough. To forsake her lover at Henry's bidding would have been hard, but to turn from him in O'Brien's presence seemed impossible.

"Now, sir, perhaps you are satisfied," said Lord Alan.

"Satisfied to go back and tell her mother that one who calls himself a gentleman has constrained a woman to proclaim her own dishonour!" rejoined Dennis.

The stinging truth struck home, and wrung from Lord Alan the avowal which had, up to that moment, formed no part of his profligate scheme. "Who talks of dishonour, Mr. O'Brien? If Amy is not yet my wedded wife, it is because you have surprised us before marriage was possible. I go from here to my banker's to take the necessary steps for procuring a special license, and I invite you to be present at our wedding this afternoon, and will further do you the honour of requesting you to give the bride away."

"I will not shrink from the task," said Dennis steadily, as his eyes fell once more upon Amy. She sat still with averted face, but the nervous action with which she clasped and unclasped her hands seemed to betray her sense of degradation in the eyes of the man who had so lately esteemed her the noblest thing on earth. "I doubt whether Henry Mertoun can be here in time, and it will be a relief to him to find that you have made the only reparation which is possible for

this night's work. I shall remain in the hotel until you can fix the time and place for our meeting this afternoon."

"Do you doubt my word, Mr. O'Brien, that you propose to remain here as a spy upon my actions?"

"Such was not my meaning," said O'Brien, with studied courtesy, divining Lord Alan's inclination to pick a quarrel with him, which might vindicate his liberty of action: "I have had a sleepless night, and a hurried journey, and I see no necessity for further exertion."

He left the room, and Lord Alan remained to writhe under the conviction that he had pledged his honour as a gentleman to the step from which he recoiled. When Amy lifted her eyes in timid gratitude, she met a very different expression in her lover's face.

"That man,—that hound, Amy, who has dared to come between us; did I hit the mark when I called him your discarded lover?"

"If it had been Henry, he would have been even more cruel in his anger," faltered Amy.

"That is not the question. I repeat, what is this man to you?"

"I believe that he loved me a little once; you can see for yourself that he hates and despises me now. Oh, Alan, if *you* turn against me, you had better kill me at once."

"I am to marry you instead," he replied with something like a sneer. "You and O'Brien have elected that it is so to be. As things were, I was

prepared to be your slave; as they are, your husband must also be your master. I have a right to claim perfect candour as to your relations with the past, absolute submission with regard to the future. As I have already said, O'Brien shall give my bride away, since I could not inflict upon him more refined torture, but when that part is played out I forbid you ever again to see, or speak with, him. Do you understand my words?"

"Yes, Alan," said Amy, low and submissively, and Alan's suspicious temper was appeased for the moment, since he could not read the doubt and terror which chilled her heart. The apple of Sodom at which Amy had snatched was already crumbling to ashes in her grasp.

CHAPTER XV.

The Wedding.

LATE in the afternoon of the same day, O'Brien met Henry Mertoun at the Waterloo Station. "It is you, Dennis," said Henry, as their hands met in close union, and eyes that were haggard with anxiety and sleeplessness were moistened for a moment: "you would scarcely be here unless you had good news for me."

"I hope that it is good," said Dennis. "I come straight from Lord Alan's wedding, and it was I who gave away the bride! Such is the irony of fate." In

few words he went on to relate his morning's work, and indeed, Henry was intolerant of details.

"We will talk of it no more," he said: "it is a black, heartless business, and but for you it might have been infinitely worse. We shall never forget what we owe you, Dennis."

"I wish that forgetfulness were possible," he replied emphatically: "the haughty gloom of Lord Alan's manner, and your sister's nervous timidity, will haunt my dreams for many a day. Do you intend to see them?"

"No," rejoined Henry, "Amy has chosen her own lot and must abide by it; I will neither make nor mar in the matter, and it will be better for me to go down to Allerton before some garbled version of the facts reaches my mother's ears. It is so likely that a Swanage grocer will make capital out of the excitement by sending a paragraph to the newspapers, and I charged Helen not to write until she had certain intelligence to give. If you feel disposed to finish your tour in Purbeck, it would be a satisfaction to the two girls to hear particulars from yourself. I have neither heart nor funds for any more holiday-making, and I shall go back to my desk at the Bank to-morrow."

Dennis acquiesced in this arrangement and went down to Poole that evening, in order that he might take the first steamer to Swanage on the following day. Helen, apprised of his movements, and of the bare fact of her sister's marriage, by a few hurried lines

from her brother, awaited his arrival on the pier; but neither seemed able to enter at once on the subject of which their hearts were full, and O'Brien's first inquiry was for Eva.

"She slept a little last night, but she is very low and nervous, and I doubt whether she will be really better until we get away from here. I thought that the fresh air might revive her, but she thinks it impossible to go out, because people will stare. I say, let them stare, but Eva is so thin-skinned."

"You must both wish to get away," said Dennis, "and your mother will need you much."

"Poor mother! I hunger to be with her," said Helen, in an unsteady voice. "I could not leave Eva here alone, and I wait for Uncle Richard's answer, as she has written to ask whether she may go home. Do you know where *they* have gone, Dennis? not, I imagine, to Lady Cecilia's."

"I suppose that they will go, or have already gone, to Scotland," replied Dennis: "Henry sent an advertisement of the wedding to the papers yesterday, and Lord Alan may think it expedient to see his father before the announcement meets his eyes."

"Tell me what you think of it all, Dennis?" said Helen, looking up suddenly.

"That is a large question, and we had better sit down if we are to talk the matter out," replied O'Brien, throwing himself on the sands, a little in advance of Helen, so that she could not see his face. "I think, Helen, that Lady Alan Rae has dark days in store for

her, and that she, in her inmost heart, knows that she has staked her happiness on a false issue."

"For the present, at all events, I should have thought that the knowledge that she *is* Lady Alan Rae would satisfy her aspirations," said Helen. "It is his conduct which puzzles me—why he should risk the displeasure of his family, and give up so much for her sake, unless he truly loves her." And Dennis was not disposed to enlighten her as to the involuntary nature of the sacrifice.

"It was a strange wedding," he said, beginning to find relief in relating his experiences. "They were married in the room in which I found them, with no attempt at bridal ceremony. Amy was still in her boating dress, with her head uncovered. She trembled so much that I thought she would have dropped, and her answers were perfectly inaudible."

"Poor Amy!" said Helen, while the tears, which she was apt to consider a sign of affectation or weakness flowed freely. "Did she speak to you, Dennis, and had she any message for us?"

"She came up to me when Lord Alan went into the next room to pay the fees, and took my hand for a moment, as she thanked me hurriedly for what I had done for her. She said something in so low a tone that I could scarcely catch it, about her ivory-bound prayer-book, which you were to give me."

"The prayer-book you gave to her on one of her birthdays. It is on her toilette-table at our lodgings

and you shall have it when we go in. Eva must wonder now whether we are coming."

They lingered no longer, and Helen left Dennis alone in the sitting-room, presently returning with the little prayer-book, which she put silently into his hand. Dennis unclasped the book to turn to the fly-leaf on which, in the happy days of their early acquaintance, he had inscribed Amy's name, and, as he did so, one or two dried flowers fluttered from between the pages.

"Memorials of the walks we have taken together," observed Dennis, and he was more deeply moved when he turned to the last leaf of the book, on which a discoloured spike of flowers was gummed, with the initials D. O. B., and a date inscribed below. "Look here, Helen; this is a spike of habenaria, the white butterfly orchis, which I picked for her, not five minutes before she told me that all was at an end between us. It is faded and blackened now, like our early love, but the relic proves that its memory still lingered in her heart, and it may be that I should have won her back if I had been less deeply wounded by her fickleness."

"That is to say, your lives might have flowed in the same current, if you had been equally shallow-hearted," said Helen, with characteristic vehemence. "No, Dennis, it is better as it is—better for you, I mean. Amy has acted basely—I must say it, though she is my own sister—and not only towards you. Poor Eva is cut to the heart."

Richard Mertoun was equally distressed and shocked

by the alteration which he noticed in his daughter when he met her at the Bixley station, two days later. The facts in connection with his niece's elopement had only been reported to him in a mitigated form; and his first feeling was one of relief, since he did not consider himself responsible for Amy's misconduct, and believed that the ill-advised haste with which the marriage had been contracted would convince Eva that his objections to Lord Alan Rae were well founded. In fact, he supposed that Eva must be more affected by the loss of her cousin's companionship than by that of her possible lover. "Why, my dear child," he said, "you look worse than when you went away. We must drive round by Popham's, and desire him to come up and see you this evening."

"Oh no, papa," said Eva earnestly. "Do not let me be worried about my health, and my appetite, and Dr. Popham's prescriptions. All that I want is, to be let alone."

Helen had gone on to Allerton by the same train, after promising, not very willingly, to return to Leasowes for a few days, if she found that her mother could spare her. "Only for a few days," she stipulated. "Dennis says that life is made up of failed experiments, and that the only inexcusable thing is to fail in the same way twice. You made a mistake in adopting Amy as a sister, and you shall not do the same thing over again with me."

"You have often said that no two sisters have less in common," said Eva.

"It was said before I knew how widely our paths were to diverge; and, as things are at present, I have no poor lover to forsake nor will my beauty turn the head of a rich one; but it would not be less fickle to abandon my connection with old Benson and the sewing-machine, and to leave our mother to carry on the struggle of life without me. And you need not regret that I have other work to do, Eva, for if I were set up on a pinnacle to be worshipped, you would soon be ashamed of your uncouth idol."

However that might be, Eva cried very much when Helen gathered together the bulky marine and geological treasures with which the railway carriage was littered, and disappeared into the booking-office to vindicate her independence by taking a second-class ticket for the remainder of the journey, instead of availing herself of her cousin's intention to pay her way home. This was another trait which pointed the contrast between the two sisters; for Eva found herself continually on the verge of giving offence by her habits of lavish liberality, in which Amy had acquiesced almost as a matter of course. The return to Leasowes seemed doubly cheerless, when Helen was no longer by her side to brace her spirits by wholesome counsel. She was harassed by her father's affectionate solicitude about her health; and the anticipation of Lady Cecilia's appearance to jar her sensitive nerves by her comments on their mutual injuries loomed like a nightmare in the background. Dr. Popham's prescriptions seemed a less evil; and Eva gave way to the lassitude

which oppressed her, and lay in bed for some days, while Misbourne was instructed to deny to visitors any access to her sick room.

Helen had not written to her mother to announce her return; so that she left her goods at the station and walked through the quiet streets of Allerton to their own house, which she found to be still untenanted. She set out at once for Charlton Manor, enjoying the coolness and verdure of the grass-fields, and the quiet beauties of the inland landscape, but subdued, at once by the parting from Eva and by the prospect of witnessing her mother's distress on Amy's account. "If it should be my lot to be crossed in love," she said to herself, "I hope that I shall bear it more bravely than poor Eva. I will take Dennis as my model of fortitude; he is neither crushed nor embittered by his disappointment, and yet no one can say that he is insensible to it."

It was late in the afternoon when Helen reached the farm, and the elms which surrounded it threw their long shadows across the grass which the sleek cows were munching with practical, if not with æsthetic, enjoyment of its dewy fragrance. While Helen hesitated to startle her mother by walking up the flagged pathway, and entering the house without preamble, her perplexity was relieved by Mr. George Charlton's appearance from behind the farm buildings. He was very unlike his small, brisk sister in person—younger by more years than she would have cared to specify, tall and broad-shouldered, deliberate in

speech, and with the somewhat bovine cast of features which is not uncommonly acquired by men whose work lies among the fields and pastures of rural England. He advanced to meet Helen with the broadest smile of congratulation. "Mrs. Mertoun will be delighted to see you, and so indeed are we all," he said. "We have not been able to talk of anything but your sister's great marriage at home, and it was just the same when I went into the market yesterday. At first Mrs. Mertoun was a little startled and upset by getting no longer notice of it, but young people must manage matters their own way, and the more we think of it the better she is pleased. As my sister Anne says, "Miss Amy's beauty will grace a coronet, and the Marquis of Raeburn cannot fail to be charmed with his daughter-in-law."

Helen was relieved, if a little surprised, to find that her mother had been enabled to view the matter through Miss Charlton's spectacles, and she felt no desire to dispel the illusion. Mrs. Mertoun was not in truth quite so free from misgivings as George Charlton represented her to be, and she shed a few tears when she had taken Helen to her own room, acknowledging that it was very sudden, and that Henry was sadly put out and vexed about it. But, she added, Amy's happiness was the chief thing to be considered, and, if her lover had insisted on secrecy, she must not be too much blamed. There was not much time for private discussion on Helen's first arrival, for Miss Charlton was hovering about, eager

to enforce her welcome by making Helen sit down to the substantial evening meal which was already spread. The cream which had been brought in for tea, rich as it was, was not considered rich enough to do her honour; and fresh supplies were ordered from the dairy, together with a golden slice of honey-comb. Helen was quite ready to do justice to these delicacies, and although she felt like a monster of hypocrisy when she was called upon to describe Lord Alan's noble appearance, courtly manners, and ardent affection, she could abandon herself with the healthy instinct of youth, which disdains to brood over unseen griefs, to the amusement of the moment when the conversation diverged to the wider subject of courtship.

"It is not much you know about it, George, the more's the pity," said Miss Charlton, who believed herself to be swayed by a heroic desire to abdicate in favour of a young sister-in-law.

"I got over it early in life," replied George, with a grim smile; "mother cured me of courting when I was only a lad, and I never tried it again."

"You have kept the matter very close all these years," rejoined Miss Charlton, "I never heard a word of it."

"Tell us now," said Helen; and though Mr. Charlton coloured and fidgetted, and said that it was nonsense, he did not resist the importunity.

"I was only a lad," he repeated, "and very much taken up with Molly Moggs the dairy-maid, who was

six years older than me, and had been keeping company with our carter since they went to Sunday-school together, though I knew nought of it. I came into the milking-house one afternoon, and, never thinking that mother was in the next stall, I came behind Moll as she bent over the milking-pail, took up her face in my two hands, and gave her a smacking kiss. Mother turned sharp round to say that Moll was wasting her time, with her face all aflame when she saw that it was I. There was Moll crying behind her apron, and I stood there like a fool not knowing what to do or say. 'You say that he never served you so before, Moll,' said mother, 'and I'll show you what to do if he ever offers to serve you so again.' She pulled my head down by the hair and gave me such a box on the ear as made the sparks fly out of my eyes. I did not think so much of the blow, but it made me mad to see Moll drop her apron and forget her crying, and lay her head against the cow's side to laugh. I locked myself up in my room and would not have any supper, and that night I swung myself out the chamber window into the garden, and ran off, meaning to enlist for a soldier or go to sea. I ran a mile beyond Allerton, and then I remembered that I had gone to the milking-house before I littered down the calves, and that the poor things would be crying for their supper all night."

"And so you went back to the farm," said Helen; "that is a delightful conclusion to the idyll. The calf which revived your wavering allegiance to the

Manor Farm ought to have been stuffed and put in a glass case." The homely talk, the country fare, were alike refreshing to her harassed spirits, and she was able to take a more cheerful view of Amy's future when they retired for the night, and it was necessary to discuss the matter with Mrs. Mertoun in all its bearings.

CHAPTER XVI.

A Bride's Welcome.

Lord Alan, as O'Brien had predicted, only delayed his journey to the North until Amy's scattered possessions were obtained from Leasowes and Swanage. The interval, brief as it was, afforded scope for many fluctuations of humour, and if at one moment nothing could exceed the tenderness of his manner, at another it was clouded by gloom and suspicion. The two whom fate had linked together after so brief an acquaintance had still much to learn of each other's natures, and the attainment of more intimate knowledge did not tend to add to their happiness.

On the morning after the wedding, Amy said, doubtfully, that she wished to write to her mother and to Eva.

"Do not look at me as if it were necessary to ask my permission," said Alan: "write by all means if you think fit, but, since much depends upon the view which may be taken of the facts connected with

our marriage, you will allow me to look over your letters."

Such a stipulation did not diminish the irksomeness of the task, and Amy began by her letter to Mrs. Mertoun, which seemed to her the easiest of composition. The words did not run fluently off her pen, and when at last she submitted the sheet to her husband's inspection, it was with the timidity with which a schoolboy places an unsuccessful exercise before the eyes of his master—a timidity justified by the event, for Lord Alan read it twice through with silence which marked his disapprobation.

"Will it do, Alan?" Amy said at last.

"I cannot say how it may do for Mrs. Mertoun. Such cold expressions of satisfaction with the lot you have chosen can scarcely be gratifying to me."

"If you wish me to say more, Alan,"—

"Can I wish to dictate expressions of happiness which are worthless unless they are spontaneous? But on one point I have a right to dictate; give me your pen." And taking it from his wife's hand, Alan slurred with a heavy stroke through the name of Dennis O'Brien, which recurred twice in the short letter. "Have I not told you, Amy, that this man, of whom you write so familiarly, must be to you as a stranger?"

"Mamma would think it unnatural if I did not call him by his christian name," said Amy.

"And I," said Lord Alan haughtily, "think it still more unnatural that you should disregard the

only order I have yet given you.—Is O'Brien's image so constantly present in your heart, that you must flaunt his insolent interference in the eyes of the world?"

Amy took back her letter in silence, and made a fresh copy, in which any mention of O'Brien was omitted; and she asked her mother to believe that the great happiness of knowing herself to be beloved by Alan had swept away all other considerations. This second draft was allowed by her husband to pass without comment; yet its reception was not so encouraging as to dispose her to risk a fresh subject of irritation in the wording of her explanation to Eva, and this other letter remained unwritten.

Amy did not fully understand that the source of Lord Alan's vindictive animosity towards O'Brien was due to his intervention on her behalf, which had left Alan no loophole of escape from an unwelcome and imprudent marriage. Such a marriage had formed no part of his profligate scheme of pleasure; and Lady Cecilia, in her systematic depreciation of Amy, had led him to believe that the exertions by which Richard Mertoun had raised himself from obscurity to wealth had not affected the position of the other members of his family; and that they still ranked among the smaller tradespeople of Allerton, so that, whatever indignation his conduct might excite there, would fail to penetrate the circle in which he moved. Lord Alan's calculations had been overthrown by O'Brien's plain dealing rather than by Amy's personal efforts to break through his toils, and,

indeed, the fatal facility with which she had consented to risk her good name at his bidding left a profound distrust of her future conduct to rankle in his breast. Since the bond which united them was indissoluble, he conceived it necessary for his honour that his wife should submit without reserve to the claims of a suspicious and exacting affection. The past must, as he said, be dead to her, except so far as he required it to be laid open before him; old ties were severed without remorse, and her one object must be to fit herself for the station to which he had, however involuntarily, exalted her. To begin life anew under such conditions might seem hard to any woman, but to Amy, whose sweet serenity of manner had owed all its charm to the consciousness that she never failed to please, the prospect was dark indeed.

"Will my father be angry?" Alan replied to her inquiry, as they approached Raeburn Castle: "why, yes: of course he will be angry, but he is a gentleman, and will not vent his displeasure upon you. My mother, who is ambitious, and has always intended me to make a great marriage, will be less easily appeased, and we can scarcely escape a bad quarter of an hour on our first arrival. If the life at Raeburn becomes altogether intolerable, we must anticipate the twelfth by going a little earlier to the shooting lodge at Cuchullin, there to reign over the gillies, and to teach you to ride and fish."

They had driven through the lodge gates, and the carriage was now winding slowly up the wild and

woodland ascent which led to the castle. Even at such a critical moment, Helen would have been drawn out of herself at the first glimpse of the bright brown stream which marked the windings of the valley by its turbulent course. The steep banks were fringed with silver-stemmed birch trees and by a sweep of purple heather, stretching away to the background of yet more purple mountains; but Amy saw it all with unseeing eyes, and she looked more often at her husband than at the landscape. Just as a turn in the road brought them within sight of the castle, the carriage-wheel almost brushed the skirts of two men, the one tall and gaunt, with a stooping figure, and a vacant, melancholy stare: the other, who was evidently his attendant, took him by the arm, and drew him aside with a gesture of authority.

"Yes," said Lord Alan, observing Amy's involuntary shudder; "that is poor Macrae. You might be here for weeks without encountering him again. He has his own set of rooms, and only walks out at an hour when people are unlikely to be about. Look at the castle, which has quite an imposing effect from here."

Amy expressed due admiration of the grey, weather-beaten, pile, which, like many of the old Scotch houses, resembled a French chateau in its general features. Tall and narrow, with a roof-line broken by twisted chimnies and pepper-pot turrets, the building was not out of keeping with the wild picturesqueness of the situation, but it wanted the trim, well-kept

air of an English country-house. There was no flower-garden, the offices lay open to view, and sheep fed up to the front door.

"I must have a word with our old servant Hugh before you get out," said Lord Alan: "If they are still in ignorance, I propose to try the effect of a *coup de théâtre.* My mother knows that Lady Cecilia was moving heaven and earth to make a marriage between your cousin and myself, and, if they choose to imagine that I came home in triumph with the rich Miss Mertoun, they will be more apt to receive you graciously and cannot for very shame draw back when the mistake is discovered."

The carriage drew up as he spoke, and after a few moments' earnest conversation with old Hugh Lord Alan returned to Amy. "As far as I can make out," he said, "my aunt's malignity has not paved the way for a charming reception. Stay where you are until I come back for you."

Amy sat still in the fly, with two servants surveying her from the open door, her feelings of nervous wretchedness gathering strength in the long interval which elapsed before Lord Alan's return, and when he came at length, his words were scarcely reassuring. "Yes, you may take the things out of the carriage, Hugh," he said as he helped Amy to alight, and he added in a low but authoritative voice as they crossed the hall: "How can you look so white and scared, at a moment when so much depends upon your pre-

sence of mind? Exert yourself, and remember that I expect you to make a favourable impression."

He threw open the drawing-room door, and presented his bride to the two pale, melancholy women whom he named to her as his mother and his sister Janet. Each advanced one step off the hearthrug on which they were standing, and murmured some inaudible words of greeting, while extending a limp hand. A military movement could not have been executed with greater precision, and Amy felt confident that the terms of her reception had been prearranged.

"Sit down, Amy, and take off your hat," said Alan, after waiting in vain for the suggestion to come from Lady Raeburn.

Amy complied, with the prompt obedience which had been the first lesson inculcated on her married life, and when she removed her hat, her hair, released from confinement, fell in a golden shower over her shoulders. "We have been travelling all night," said she, blushing, with the prettiest gesture of deprecation.

Lord Alan assured her that the disorder was not unbecoming, and appealed to his mother to confirm the assertion, but the compression of Lady Raeburn's thin lips seemed to declare the remark as unseemly as the exhibition itself.

"I think I had better go and put my hair in order," said Amy, struggling with a hysterical sensation in her throat.

"You shall do so as soon as your room is ready," said Lady Raeburn, and she rang the bell, and desired that the north room might be prepared at once.

"And Hugh," said Lord Alan, "tell the housemaid to light a good fire, and to see that everything is thoroughly aired. Amy is not used to our northern climate, and that north room always feels like a charnel house," he added, resentfully.

"I am sorry that you find it necessary to give your own orders," said Lady Raeburn: "you should have given notice of your coming if you wished us to make due preparations."

"We could not give notice of what we did not know ourselves, could we, Amy?" said Lord Alan smiling. Lady Raeburn still remained grimly silent; and the presence of mind which she had been enjoined to display altogether deserted Amy, for she burst into tears, striving to check her sobs like a chidden child, when she became conscious that her husband's eyes were fixed upon her in severe displeasure. "I am at a loss to understand the source of your distress," he said, impatiently.

Such an un-lover-like address was gratifying to Lady Raeburn, as it indicated that her son was already weary of the toy for which he had sacrificed his worldly interests; and, with the strange complexity of human motives, she instantly began to regard her daughter-in-law with more favourable eyes. "Your wife's feelings of shame and distress seem to me more excusable than your own levity, Alan," she said: "let

Janet take her to her room, while you and I talk this matter over, and by dinner time I hope that she will be able to rejoin us."

Amy rose to follow Lady Janet, who led the way up the staircase in silence, and ushered her into a large room, imperfectly lighted by two tall and narrow windows, and obscured by ponderous furniture which had once, perhaps, been rich and handsome, but which was now subdued by time to one uniform tint of ashen grey. The blinds were half-drawn down, and the freshly-lighted fire was feebly smouldering. When Lady Janet had remarked that the evening was wet and chilly, and had volunteered to send her up a cup of tea, she left Amy a prey to her own melancholy thoughts. She walked to the window to shiver at a dreary prospect of bare hills and moorland, shrouded by mist and driving rain, and returned to cower over the fire which seemed only to add to the chilliness of the room, as the rain fell down the wide chimney and sputtered into it with a hissing sound. Amy did not know how long she had sat there, in a stupor of fatigue and misery, when she was roused by the sound of Alan's approaching footsteps, a sound which already, alas, made her heart beat with more of fear than pleasure. There was a degree of irritation in his manner which argued that he had obtained little satisfaction from his conference with Lady Raeburn, and he glanced with annoyance from Amy to her unopened boxes.

"Have you not begun your preparations for din-

ner, Amy? Unpunctuality is one of the unpardonable sins in this house."

"The maid brought me a cup of tea, and since that I have been nearly asleep," said Amy. "I am so miserably tired that I thought of going to bed instead of dressing for dinner."

"Leaving me to fight your battle alone,—no, Amy, that will scarcely do. Such palpable cowardice must prejudice my father against you, and with him everything depends on the first impression. Had you been guided by me, we should now have been cruising in the 'Vanessa,' without a care in the world; but since we are here, we must remain until my father thinks fit to provide us with the means necessary for a separate establishment. You cannot sit with folded hands until good fortune comes, and I must entreat you to dress in all your bravery, and to exert those powers of fascination in which you were not deficient when we met at Leasowes."

Amy knew that such entreaty could only be interpreted as a command, and she exerted herself to such purpose that she was ready before Lord Alan returned from his dressing-room to conduct her downstairs. The other ladies had not been equally expeditious, but Lord Raeburn was there, with another gentleman, who proved to be his agent, Mr. M'Clintock. His presence seemed to diminish the awkwardness of the introduction, and Lord Raeburn took her by both hands and kissed her cheeks with as much well-bred courtliness as if she had been the daughter-in-law of

his choice. He was a broken-down man, prematurely aged by the early dissipation which had impoverished his estate and ruined his health, but the instinct of good breeding had survived the failure of his powers of mind and body, and his first desire was to relieve Amy's overwhelming embarrassment.

"A little startled, and nervous, eh, my dear? We shall soon make you feel at home with us. What's your name? Amy—a very pretty name it is, too. We shall be better acquainted by and by, and if Alan has been reckless and imprudent, I am sure that we must all admit the potency of the attraction, eh, M'Clintock?"

Mr. M'Clintock, a little, sharp-featured man, with bushy red whiskers, and a manner at once fussy and subservient, replied to this appeal by a bow which seemed to denote absolute agreement and as much admiration as his inferior position entitled him to express.

How Amy got through the ordeal of that first evening, she herself scarcely knew. Lord Raeburn took her in to dinner, and still endeavoured to reassure her by his easy flow of talk, and by inquiries about her former home, and Amy smiled mechanically and tried to appear interested, and to make such answers as might not offend her husband, whose eyes were, as she was conscious, constantly fixed upon her. There was nothing to draw off his attention, for although Mr. M'Clintock and Lady Janet conversed a little about the weather and the crops, Lady Raeburn

maintained the most frigid silence. Amy looked forward with desperation to the moment when the move should be made for the ladies' return to the drawing-room, and was profoundly grateful to Lord Alan for sparing her from this further trial. "I think, Janet," he said, as he held open the door, "that you had better show Amy up to her room at once. She is quite worn out by our night journey."

Lady Janet lighted a candle, disclaiming Amy's timid offer to find her own way upstairs, and led the way for her sister-in-law, who felt, as before, as if a gaoler were conducting her to her cell; and, indeed, a prisoner would not have envied her the desolate and home-sick yearnings which kept sleep from her pillow that night. The wind moaned and whistled round the house, arousing the creaking and mysterious sounds which are apt to infest old woodwork, and which, in this instance her nervous and excited fancy connected with the lunatic, whose face, as she had seen it that afternoon, still haunted her waking dreams. The long hours of darkness and solitude seemed almost intolerable, and yet, when Lord Alan came upstairs, Amy feigned to be asleep, conscious that any attempt to reply to words either of reproof or tenderness would end in a fit of hysterical sobbing.

CHAPTER XVII.

Mediation.

"My dear Eva! you must forgive me for forcing my way in," said Lady Cecilia Wray, entering the Leasowes drawing-room with the rustle and flutter which characterised all her movements: "I called twice before, when you were in your bed-room, and as I understood from your servants that you were better, and able to come downstairs, I would not be denied. I feel sure that when the first awkwardness of meeting is over, it will be a relief to you to know how completely I acquit you of blame in this unfortunate affair."

"Thank you," said Eva, in a tone which did not express profound gratitude for this assurance.

"I am really grieved to see you look so ill and suffering," continued Lady Cecilia, "you ought not to be left so much alone."

"My cousin Helen is coming for a few days next week; in the meantime I think that I am best alone," said Eva, too sore at heart to be polite.

"Your cousin Helen; another of the sisters I think," said Lady Cecilia. "Then this marriage has caused no breach between the two families?"

"Why should it, Lady Cecilia? Why should I not see my cousin Helen, because her sister is married to Lord Alan Rae?"

"Forgive any seeming impertinence in the question, my dear Eva; the interest I take in Alan must be my excuse: I have no children of my own, and his position as the probable head of the family gives him a special claim on my regard. The marriage has been a terrible shock to us all, involving the ruin of all his prospects, as well as family disunion, for Lady Raeburn does not seem at all able to reconcile herself to it. Have you heard from your cousin since their arrival at Raeburn?"

"No," said Eva, "I do not imagine that I shall hear from her now."

"Indeed it is natural that she should shrink from any communication after treating you with such ingratitude and duplicity; and yet, my dear Eva, I fancy that you will agree with me that it is wise to make the best of an accomplished fact. That is my poor brother's view; he admires Lady Alan's beauty and her pleasing manners, and so on; and he believes that Alan is really attached to her. That is a great point, as he has always been so *volage*, and, if he will settle down and give up his extravagant habits, Lord Raeburn will do what he can for them. But, with poor Macrae to consider, on whose comfort no expense is spared, and with many other claims upon him, the allowance which he can make to Alan is certainly inadequate to his wants as a married man, and it has occurred to me that Mr. Mertoun might be induced to come forward."

"To come forward?" repeated Eva, with wilful ob-

tuseness, since she could scarcely fail to understand Lady Cecilia's meaning.

"To make them an allowance, to settle something on his niece, dear Eva. However much we may deplore the way it was done, it is really a brilliant marriage for her. She must, humanly speaking, one day be the Marchioness of Raeburn, and her income ought to be in some degree proportioned to her future position."

"Would it not be better to talk to papa on such a matter of business?" said Eva after a pause.

"I will gladly do so, when I have secured your kind interest. It cannot be *merely* a matter of business between you and me, and as I know that you were sincerely attached to your cousin, you must allow me to consult you on a matter which concerns her happiness. Her position in the family is an awkward and distressing one, and, as Lady Raeburn writes, there are times when Alan himself seems to repent of the rash step which he has taken. All this would be changed if a fair competence were secured to the young couple, so that they might have their own establishment, and I will answer for it that Lord Raeburn will meet Mr. Mertoun half way, if he is disposed to do anything for them."

"I will talk to papa about it when you have made such a proposal," said Eva, but even this concession did not satisfy Lady Cecilia.

"Indeed, Eva, the proposal will come better from you. I feel such perfect confidence in the generosity

and nobleness of your disposition, and though Mr. Mertoun might distrust my motives, yours are beyond suspicion. And now, dear child, let us speak of your own health. I fear that you have allowed this sad business to worry you more than it ought."

"It is the constant anxiety about my health which worries me," said Eva: "I believe that I am to be sent away somewhere, to Switzerland first, then to the south of France. I wish, Lady Cecilia, that you would give my love to Amy in your next letter to Raeburn, and say that I have not felt well enough to write, but that I should like to hear from her."

"I will not fail to give your message," said Lady Cecilia: "I left a letter half-finished on my table, for I knew that it would be a satisfaction to her to hear of Leasowes." She embraced Eva, with the most demonstrative affection, and, as she threw herself back in the carriage, she was disposed to take a less gloomy view of Alan's imprudent marriage. The transparent thinness of Eva's hands, her laboured breathing and hectic colour, were very alarming symptoms, and if Mr. Mertoun were doomed to lose his only child, his large fortune must devolve on the other branch of the family.

It was with some such conviction that Eva applied herself to the task which Lady Cecilia had imposed upon her. Her father came home about an hour before dinner, for his application to business was now postponed to his increasing solicitude about his

daughter, and he grudged every moment he spent away from her side.

"How goes it, my child?" he said, tenderly: "you look a little flushed this afternoon."

"I am not worse, papa: only rather flurried by a visit from Lady Cecilia Wray, who forced her way in."

"Just like her assurance," growled Mr. Mertoun, "she drove to the office twice last week, but I refused to see her. What account does she give of her hopeful young couple?"

"They are at Raeburn, and I am afraid things are not made smooth for poor Amy there."

"Pity is wasted on her, Eva. She went into the thing with her eyes open; for it was here, in this very room, that I told her what I knew of Lord Alan—a plausible, profligate young fellow. And now, I suppose, she wants to be off her bargain."

"I do not think that it is as bad as that, papa. Lady Cecilia says her position would be very different if she had a home of her own, and I want you to make a settlement on her."

"*You* want me to make a settlement," repeated Mr. Mertoun; "you mean that Lady Cecilia has insisted on your asking it."

"She did not *insist*, papa, but certainly she suggested it, and I have made up my mind that it is the right thing to do. Supposing that I do not get well, and you must let me talk of that which is in your mind night and day, what is to become of all your money?"

"It may go to the dogs, for what I care," said Mr. Mertoun gruffly: "it *will* go to the dogs if Alan Rae is to have the handling of it."

"I ask you to help Amy, not her husband," said Eva, with rising colour: "if she had not come to live with me, they would never have met, and she might have been happily married to a man who truly loved her. Now I want to feel that I have not wholly wrecked her happiness."

"I will do anything you please, if you can honestly say that she has not wholly wrecked yours."

"Not in the way you think," said Eva, after a moment's pause: "the marriage was a great shock to me, and, if I am to tell all the truth, I will confess that it is more than a year since I first thought that Lord Alan loved, and might one day ask me to marry him. But that is all past and gone, and I can see now that I have had a great escape."

"You speak like a brave and true woman, Eva, and now, my dear, you have nothing to do but to get well."

"If I can, papa. But you know that, long before I was old enough to think of being crossed in love, the doctors used to shake their heads over me and say that I was hard to rear. Doctor Popham says that the Engadin now, followed up by a winter at Mentone, will quite set me up; and, as I have nothing to do as I lie here but to make plans, I have a scheme cut and dry of which you shall hear when Amy's business is settled."

"Settle it then," replied Mr. Mertoun, almost cheerfully, as he noted Eva's more healthy and hopeful tone: "at what price does Lady Cecelia rate the honour of our noble connection? Will five thousand pounds, ten thousand pounds, or nothing short of half-a-million be considered a fitting portion?"

"I should think ten thousand pounds might do," said Eva, doubtfully, since she was as profoundly ignorant of the value of money as people are apt to be who have never known what it is to have a wish ungratified.

"I am glad that you are so modest in your ideas," said her father, smiling: "I am to give away five hundred pounds a year to reward Amy for running away after she has been five weeks under my roof. I will not do this, but, as I have left each of my brother's children five thousand pounds in my will, I shall be prepared to pay over the interest of Amy's portion into the hands of trustees for her separate use and benefit. Do not trouble your little head further in the matter: I will put the offer into writing, and if it is declined by Lord Raeburn or his son, there is no great harm done. But perhaps you had better mention to Helen that I do not undertake to pension more than one runaway niece at a time."

"You must not be unjust to Helen, nor hurt her feelings just as you are going to ask a favour of her. You know, papa, that I have set my heart on her going abroad with me."

"I know: and I thought that she had declared it

to be out of the question. I fancy that helpless mother of hers cannot keep house for herself."

"Aunt Anne would be perfectly happy living with or near the Charltons, but Helen says that Henry would be dull and uncomfortable, unless he had some one to quarrel with. And do you know I fancy that he would find the excitement which he needs here in Bixley."

"Do you expect me to renew the offer of partnership which he refused so uncivilly four years ago?" said Mr. Mertoun.

"Yes, papa, I do, if I could ascertain first that it will not be refused again. Ask Henry to come here next Sunday, on business—Amy's business I mean—and let me have him to myself in the afternoon."

Mr. Mertoun was very tractable about this second scheme of Eva's, and she had hardly understood before how much his heart was set on keeping together the business in which his fortune was embarked. Nor was Henry indisposed to listen to Eva's arguments in favour of abandoning his desk at the bank for a career which would not only give him material wealth but a wider range of interests, and he scarcely confessed to himself that the desire to bring a smile into his cousin's pale, wasted face was a stronger motive for concession than those which lay on the surface. Helen was very much surprised and even a little indignant when he returned to Allerton with his plans cut and dry, and assumed as a matter of course that the only obstacle to her going abroad with Eva was

removed. The terms on which he was to enter Mr. Mertoun's office were so liberal that he could make his mother comfortable wherever she might choose to live, and when Helen declared that it was hard to demand the sacrifice of her independence, he said with a laugh:

"Dennis warned me that you would trot out Mr. Benson and the sewing-machine, and he advised me to ratten you by cutting off the band of the machine after you went to bed."

Helen coloured with a deep sense of mortification. She was impervious to her brother's raillery, but could not so easily tolerate O'Brien's ridicule of her exaggerated estimate of the nobility of manual labour. She thought, and said rather hotly, that if Henry and his friend chose to be inconsistent, she should still stick to her principles; nevertheless she terminated her business relations with Mr. Benson, and devoted her energies to the study of the Swiss Flora.

Amy was not forgotten, and indeed the silence with which her name was passed over did not indicate forgetfulness. Helen had been indignant and Mrs. Mertoun had been sorrowful over the only letter which had reached them, and it was Henry who read between the lines, declaring that the composition was dictated, and that, unless Mrs. Mertoun wished to correspond with her noble son-in-law, the letter might remain unanswered.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Prison Bars.

Mr. Mertoun put into writing the terms on which he proposed to make his contribution to Lord Alan's income, and Lady Cecilia received the statement with warm expressions of gratitude and forwarded it at once to Raeburn Castle. His offer was discussed in family conclave—a council from which Amy was excluded, since she scarcely, even in her husband's eyes, ranked as a member of his family—and it did not awaken any great enthusiasm. Lord Alan considered himself insulted by the precautions which had been devised to secure both interest and principal to his wife's separate use; and Lady Raeburn remarked that, to judge by her present costly style of dress, the greater part of the allowance would be swallowed up by her personal expenses. Lord Raeburn, who had all his life been expecting a windfall which was to repair his broken fortunes, took a more sanguine view of the transaction, regarding the 5,000*l.* as only an instalment of the wealth which must devolve on his daughter-in-law on Eva's death; and Amy was a little perplexed by the interest which the old Marquis appeared to take in her uncle's family affairs, his inquiries about Eva's health and the cause of Mrs. Richard Mertoun's early death. It was probable, as he said, that the consumptive tendency was inherited.

Lady Cecilia had faithfully transmitted the forgiving little message which it had cost Eva some effort to send, but Lord Alan did not think it necessary to pass it on to his wife. He thought it might have the bad effect of unsettling her mind, which ought not to be diverted from the task assigned to her of raising herself to the level of her new associates, and he discouraged any reminiscences of her former life. No efforts, however, seemed to break down the constraint of Amy's intercourse with her mother and sister-in-law, although she continued to be on tolerably easy terms with Lord Raeburn. Silence and gloom brooded over the family party, and Amy's fancy was constantly haunted by the unseen presence of the unhappy lunatic, whom she did not again encounter in her walks but whose apartment was only separated from them by a corridor shut off by double doors. His name was never mentioned in her presence, and when she occasionally met Lady Raeburn coming from that part of the house she swept by with a more stately air of chilling reserve.

By her husband's desire, Amy spent her time chiefly in the drawing-room, however little she was made welcome there, but she was apt to retreat to her own room when Alan was not by to mark her absence. On one of these occasions, he returned from his ride earlier than usual and followed her upstairs. "I have been looking for you," he said. "Why are you moping here?"

"I have not been upstairs very long," said Amy.

"Some visitors came, and, as Lady Raeburn did not introduce me to them, I thought it best to come away."

"It was exceedingly ill-judged," said Alan, with displeasure. "You ought to have stayed, and taken a part in the conversation. Such morbid sensitiveness to petty slights is quite out of place, and will never vindicate your position in my mother's eyes. You should take pains to win her regard, instead of bestowing all your powers of pleasing on my father and M'Clintock."

If Amy made the prescribed efforts, they were so evidently unsuccessful that Lord Alan shortly afterwards announced his intention of going at once to the lodge at Cuchullin, where he and Amy were to reside during the season of grouse-shooting; and the change was welcomed by Amy, who felt that it might be more possible to win her husband's favour when she was withdrawn from Lady Raeburn's disapproving eyes.

The appointments of the shooting-lodge, which had never been intended for a lady's accommodation, were rude and meagre; and Lord Alan was gratified by his wife's indifference to her personal comfort, and her anxiety to minister to his own. He was not displaced from the occupation of the only easy chair, and Amy spent a whole morning in papering over the crevices in the wall, through which insidious draughts had whistled to disturb his repose. In requital for such attentions, he devoted the first week

of their stay at Cuchullin to her amusement. He taught her how to throw a fly, or, at all events, to admire his own dexterity in the art, and he placed her on a Highland pony, and walked by her side over moss and moorland, to discover where the grouse lay thickest. It was while he was in this happy mood that Amy found courage to enter on a subject which lay very near her heart.

"I have been thinking, Alan, that I never gave mamma our address, nor even told her that we were going to Scotland, and that must be the reason why I have had no answer to my letter."

"Mr. Mertoun is aware that we went to Raeburn, and the post-town can always be found in the peerage," replied Alan.

"Still," said Amy, with greater timidity, "mamma may think that you did not wish her to write, as I gave no address."

"Such a surmise would not be far from the truth, Amy. At all events, the next advances must come from your family, and when they are made it will be time enough to decide whether they are to be accepted." Such an answer was not calculated to appease the hunger of home-sickness, but it taught Amy the necessity of restraining its expression.

Two days later, however, when Amy came down to breakfast, she saw among the letters which lay beside her husband's plate one directed to herself in her mother's handwriting. She saw, and almost seized it, but at that moment Alan entered the room, and she

retreated behind the urn, conscious that the involuntary action might be reckoned against her as an offence. Lord Alan read his own letters as he ate his breakfast, and took up the envelope which bore the Allerton post mark from time to time, without making any comment on it. Amy's heart sank, and she felt an increasing difficulty in replying to indifferent remarks with any semblance of ease.

At length Lord Alan approached the subject: "A letter for you, Amy, has come up from the castle which has the Allerton postmark."

"I suppose it is from mamma," said Amy, and she could not, with all her efforts, control the tremour of her voice. Since Lord Alan did not offer to hand her the letter, she said timidly: "Will you read it first, Alan?"

"If you really wish to be guided by my advice, Amy," said Lord Alan, pausing for a moment as if to give greater force to his words by weighing them carefully, "the letter will be burnt un-read: you have been talking at random ever since you came down; and, since you are so much agitated by the very idea of receiving news from your former home, its effect will probably be to unsettle your mind altogether."

"I hope to feel more settled when I have heard of them all," said Amy.

"I presume that you mean that you will be more settled in your discontent with your new surroundings," replied Alan, fixing his eyes upon his wife with a singularly wild and stern expression which made her

feel, as she had so often felt before, that submission was the only course which lay open to her.

"If you think so, Alan, I will not ask to read the letter."

"Do not answer as if I required an abject and slavish obedience," rejoined Alan with increasing irritability: "your compliance is nothing to me, unless it is the result of conviction."

"I wish you to burn the letter," said Amy, and her husband took her at her word, and threw it on the logs which were blazing on the hearth. He waited until it was consumed, before he turned round to raise Amy's drooping face to his own.

"After all, Amy, I believe that you value that worthless piece of paper more than my love."

Amy laid her head on his shoulder and forced herself to smile, even as a dog will fawn upon the hand of his cruel master. "Your love is all the world to me, Alan."

He kissed her again before he left the room; but when he passed the windows a moment afterwards, whistling to his dogs, Amy abandoned herself to a passion of tears. In her happy days at Leasowes, the correspondence with her family had been only an irksome duty; but now her heart yearned for the mother's love and tender forbearance from which Alan had decreed that she should be for ever estranged: and, indeed, a stouter heart than Amy's might have recoiled from the prospect of being cut off from human sympathy which would have afforded some little

relief from the incessant exaction of her husband's jealous and exclusive passion. But her part was taken and must be played out; and when Lord Alan returned to the house an hour later, Amy was able to meet him with a smiling and unruffled face.

Then came the twelfth, that era in Highland life, and Lord Raeburn came up to the lodge with Mr. M'Clintock to stay for a few days. Amy took pains to see that the dinner was tolerably dressed and served, and did the honours prettily; but the complimentary remarks of Lord Raeburn appeared to irritate his son, and he spoke sharply to his wife after they went upstairs for the night. "It is all very well to please my father, Amy, but your very easy manners with M'Clintock are not to my taste. No doubt you have been accustomed to associate on equal terms with that stamp of man when you were living at Allerton, but I wish you to remember that my wife is not to place herself on a level with my father's factor."

At breakfast next morning, Amy scarcely dared to reply to Mr. M'Clintock's remarks on the weather, nor to ask him if he took sugar in his tea, and again her husband found an opportunity of saying that she was always in extremes; he had been seriously annoyed by her want of proper courtesy, and especially since M'Clintock's influence over Lord Raeburn made his good-will a matter of importance to himself.

Now that the grouse-shooting had begun, Amy had many lonely hours; she was not adventurous, and, on the only occasion when she wandered to any distance

from home, she was considerably alarmed by the sudden apparition of two or three bare-legged boys who sprang out of the heather, and signified to her with the signs and Gaelic vociferation which were needed to help out their imperfect English, that she must go back at once; and it took some time to discover that they had no sinister intentions, and were placed there to prevent anyone from crossing the scent of the deer which Lord Alan was stalking. After this adventure, her walks were restricted to "the policy," which consisted of a few ruinous outhouses, and a garden chiefly stocked with kale, and a wilderness of gooseberry bushes, so laden with fruit as to afford a new experience to her English taste.

The factor's house was situated half-way between Raeburn and Cuchullin, and Mrs. M'Clintock drove up the valley to visit Lady Alan at her husband's instigation. Amy was cheered by the sight of a kindly woman's face, and by some innocent prattle about the great people of the county, and told her husband of the visit as a pleasant incident when he returned to dinner; adding that Mrs. M'Clintock had asked her to spend an afternoon at her house.

"I suppose that you did not accept the invitation without reference to me?" said Lord Alan.

"No, Alan; I said that I was not sure whether you could spare Alick to drive me down in the car."

"I am glad that you showed that remnant of discretion. I certainly shall not be able to spare Alick."

"Your sister Janet went to drink tea with Mrs.

M'Clintock while we were at Raeburn," said Amy, rather plaintively.

"The cases are altogether different. My sister is a lady by birth, while you have still your position to achieve: and it will not be done by mixing yourself up with a lot of middle-class people."

Amy humbly accepted the statement of her inferiority, even if it occurred to her to wonder whether the subtle aristocratic essence lay in Lady Janet's frigid manners, her pronounced Scotch accent, or in the bad taste which distinguished her dress.

"We will go back to the Castle next week, since you cannot live without society," resumed Lord Alan after a pause. It was a severe punishment for so slight an offence, but the grouse were becoming scarce, the weather was bad, and Lord Alan had begun to find his wife's gentle and submissive devotion somewhat monotonous.

In the presence of a third person, Lord Alan still restrained the display of his irritable and capricious temper; but Hector M'Clintock was a shrewd observer, and it was in his mind that the suspicion which had more than once flashed across the unhappy wife, only to be rejected with horror, first took definite shape. "I am not easy about Lord Alan," he said one afternoon to his wife, when he returned from taking lunch at the Castle. "He used to be a happy, genial-tempered young fellow, and I begin to be afraid that his brain is in an irritable state. He was speaking to Lady Alan in a strange wild way when I went into the

library this morning; and though his manner changed in a moment, and he seemed confused by his violence, I could see that she did not dare to meet his eye, and that he was constantly watching her."

"Poor thing; I fancied that she had a very careworn expression when I went up to see her at Cuchullin," said Mrs. M'Clintock, compassionately. "What can you do, Hector?"

"I wish that I knew what was for the best. If I say a word to the Marquis he will fuss and fidget, and talk of it all over the neighbourhood, and if I go to my lady I shall be called an officious old fool for my pains. And yet I cannot see the last hope of the family cast away when a timely warning may avert the calamity which threatens him." M'Clintock had spent his life in the hopeless task of bolstering up the broken fortunes of his employers; and, if he had amassed a sufficient, although not an ample competence in the course of his labours, loyalty to the house of Rae was still his prevailing motive. He had been treated with contumely when he remonstrated against extravagance or mismanagement, and with respectful consideration when money could only be obtained by his aid, and still worked on with unabated zeal, looking forward to Lord Alan's succession to inaugurate a new era of prosperity; he had, indeed, been more remarkable for his quick parts than for his correct morals, but M'Clintock had expected his early marriage to supply the ballast in which his nature was deficient. He laid the case before Lady

Raeburn as delicately as he could, only suggesting that it would be well for Lord and Lady Alan to go to London for a few weeks, as Lord Alan appeared to be out of health and spirits, and might benefit by change of scene and the best medical advice.

The unhappy mother could not, would not see in what direction his fears pointed, and declared that Alan was in excellent health, though perhaps a little oppressed in spirits by the society of his inane wife. M'Clintock apologised with his usual deference for obtruding unnecessary advice, but he was satisfied that he had made an impression, and found it difficult to appear surprised at the intelligence which Lord Raeburn imparted to him a day or two afterwards.

"We have settled to let our young couple go up to town for November, as they can turn out at any time if we get a winter let for the house in Eaton Square. What do you think of the plan, M'Clintock?"

The agent expressed his cordial approval, and Lord Alan graciously accepted the suggestion. The short days and bad weather had cut off the resources of out-door amusement, and although he had his misgivings as to his wife's fitness for society, he allowed that the dissipations of London in November were not very seductive. But he took the precaution, with his mother's full concurrence, of engaging a middle-aged Scotchwoman as Amy's maid, who was rigid in her views and unattractive in her person, and with whom Lady Alan might walk out when he was unable to

accompany her. The preparations for departure were soon made, and when a turn in the road hid the Castle from her view Amy felt as if years instead of months had elapsed since the day when she first caught a glimpse of the grey pile.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Ordeal of Suffering.

HOPE had so nearly died out of Amy's breast, that it was scarcely any shock to her to discover that the contact with strangers revived her husband's injurious suspicions with added force. Twice in the course of their railway journey to the south he ordered her to change places with him, and on reaching Carlisle he declared his intention of moving into another compartment. "Could you not see," he said irritably, "that I wished you to avoid the insolent stare of that young man who sat opposite to you?"

"I did not notice that he stared at me," replied Amy.

"Possibly not; a modest woman would have been conscious of it in a moment."

Instead of resenting the insult implied by these words, Amy sought to disarm her husband's anger by greater docility, and, although the only other occupant of the compartment was an elderly gentleman who alternately read his newspaper and slept over it, she

kept down her veil, and looked sedulously out of window.

On the evening after their arrival in town, Amy accepted with gratitude the suggestion that they should go to the theatre, but the same unhappy delusion pursued her there. Just as she was becoming interested in the performance, Lord Alan inquired whether it were necessary to her happiness to occupy such a conspicuous position, and he so disposed the curtains of their private box that she might neither see nor be seen. As they were driving home he informed her that her levity of conduct had made it impossible for him to take her to any other place of public resort. Any one might have seen when she dropped her fan in the lobby, and allowed a stranger to return it to her, that it was only a flimsy pretext for attracting attention. Amy shed a few tears, but it did not occur to her to rebel, even in thought, against the dictates of her husband's capricious humour; and indeed one source of her wretchedness lay in the conviction that since her most trivial acts could be interpreted in such a sense, they must in truth be blame-worthy.

The outward circumstances of her life soon became even more cheerless than they had been at Raeburn. Their establishment was on the narrowest footing, and Lord Alan said that as the house was prepared for letting, it was not expedient to make use of the drawing-rooms, and that they must inhabit the room behind the dining-room; but Amy soon discovered that his real motive was a fear lest she should

be guilty of the indecorum of showing herself at the windows which commanded a view of the square. The town housemaid undertook to cook for them, with such indifferent success that Lord Alan, ascribing a succession of failures to Amy's bad housekeeping, seldom took his meals at home; but he veiled his movements in studied uncertainty, and she never knew whether to expect him or not, except that after a time she began to interpret his assertions by contraries. When he said that he was going out for the afternoon he often returned after a short interval, as if for the purpose of ascertaining that she was taking no unworthy advantage of his absence; and if he said that he should only be away for a few minutes she sometimes ventured to indulge in the relief of tears with less dread lest he should return in time to detect their traces, and overwhelm her with the bitterest reproaches. He regulated her movements in his absence with rigorous exactness. There were days when he only permitted her to take exercise within the railings of the Square gardens, escorting her across the road himself, and returning with the exactness of a gaoler to unlock the gate when the hour of exercise had expired. In his happier moods he required her to go with her maid, Elspeth, in a cab to the gate of Kensington Gardens, there to pace the broad walk frequented by nursery-maids and children; and he informed her that he should probably walk or ride round the park at the same hour, but that she was on no account to look out for him, from which Amy

understood that this indulgence was to be forfeited if her head was even once turned in the direction of the ride. If visitors ever came to the house they were not admitted; and in after years when Amy looked back to those weeks of wretchedness she wondered how it was that her own brain had not given away beneath the protracted torture, which was often heightened by physical terror; although Alan still refrained from any expressions of violence, and there was even a studied deference in his manner to her in the presence of his servants. But Amy knew well that they did not regard her as the mistress of her house, but rather as some abject creature whose conduct had rendered it necessary that she should, in her own interests, be hedged in by such restraints.

On one occasion, when Amy, with a transient impulse of independence, put on her bonnet with the intention of walking to Arabella Row to match a skein of Berlin wool, she found Elspeth waiting for her in the hall. "I understood from his lordship," she said, "that you would require me to walk out with you whenever you did not take the Square key."

"Certainly," said Amy, convicted of a grave misdemeanour, nor did she ever again attempt to evade the vigilance of her attendant.

Nearly three weeks had passed, each day seeming to give fresh colour to the suspicions which clouded Alan's brain, and consequently to add to the rigour of the thraldom in which he held his unhappy wife, when Lord Alan one evening returned from his club

and informed her that he had accepted an invitation for her as well as for himself to dine at Sir John Hawthorne's. "They are friends of the Wrays," he said, "and I think he said that he had met you at dinner."

"Yes," said Amy, smiling faintly, as the memory of a time that seemed very far off returned to her: "he dined at Leasowes, the first time I ever saw you."

"True," said Alan gloomily: "he said that Lady Hawthorne would call, but I told him that you never saw visitors; and then he said that she would leave cards with an invitation, and he made me name a day, so that altogether I did not see how we were to get out of it. So you are to accept the invitation, and I really trust that, after all that has passed, you begin to see the necessity of being more circumspect in your conduct."

"Yes, indeed, Alan," said Amy very submissively, and although she had abandoned all hope of averting his displeasure and suspicion she looked forward to the sight of human kind as to an era in her monotonous existence. She wore full evening dress for the first time since her marriage, and presented herself before her husband's eyes with the timid hope of meeting a glance of transient admiration; but Alan found more to criticise than to approve and twice sent her back to her room to make some alteration in her *coiffure* and trinkets. Consequently they were late, and, as the party was a large one, and dinner

was announced almost at once, it was only as she was passing out of the drawing-room again, that Amy descried with a thrill of very mingled feelings, the fair head of Dennis O'Brien in the centre of a knot of gentlemen. His face brought back all the hunger of home-sickness by which she was now constantly consumed, but only for a moment, and she glanced at Lord Alan with a tightening of the heart, remembering his fierce denunciations on their wedding day; but his calmness was not disturbed, and her experience of his fluctuating humour inclined her to hope that O'Brien was no longer an object of his resentment.

They took their places at the dinner-table, and then Amy discovered that Dennis was her right hand neighbour, and that her husband was exactly opposite to her, but partly screened from her sight by an épergne of flowers. In a sort of desperation, Amy kept her face turned towards the toothless old peer who had taken her down, and who desired nothing so much as to be allowed to eat his dinner in peace, undistracted by Lady Alan's disjointed remarks about the weather and the winter exhibitions. Her resources were soon exhausted, and when she began to cut her bread into dice, Dennis felt that his turn was come. "Are we not to recognise each other, Lady Alan?" he said, quietly.

"Oh yes," replied Amy, dropping her voice below the general hum of conversation. "But I never expected to see you here to-night."

"The coincidence is not so very surprising. I

came to town on business connected with the museum, and Mr. Wray gave me an introduction to Sir John, who is one of his scientific friends. I am going down to Allerton next week, and it will be a pleasure to your mother to hear that I have seen you."

"Give her my very best love," said Amy.

At that moment there was a lull in the conversation, and Lord Alan said, with such distinct utterance that it was plain for whom his words were intended, "I have met Mr. O'Brien, Miss Hawthorne, but neither Lady Alan nor myself have the honour of his acquaintance."

Dennis gave one rapid glance at Amy, and saw that light and colour had faded out of her face, and that the brilliant beauty which had struck him on her entrance, was exchanged for a miserable, anxious, hunted expression, which awakened his deepest compassion. He turned hastily away, and did not address another syllable to her, but Amy knew too well the relentless nature of her husband's suspicions to hope that she could escape reproach.

It was an infinite relief to both of them when the move was made for the ladies to leave the dining table; and Amy began to breathe more freely, little dreaming that her ordeal of suffering was only begun. Five minutes afterwards, Lord Alan entered the drawing-room, and went straight up to Lady Hawthorne without looking at his wife. "You must excuse our taking a hurried departure, Lady Hawthorne. I observed that my wife looked ill at dinner, and as she

must wish to go home at once, I have taken the liberty of ordering a cab, instead of waiting for our carriage."

While Lady Hawthorne expressed civil regret, Amy stood up with pale and agitated looks, which justified the plea of indisposition, and Lord Alan cut short the leave-taking, standing at the open door until she followed him out. They left an uncomfortable impression behind them, and Miss Hawthorne remarked on the strange tone of Lord Alan's reply when she told him that they had arranged that Mr. O'Brien should sit next to Lady Alan, as they both belonged to the Leasowes neighbourhood.

"Ah well, the Rae's are all strange," said Lady Hawthorne significantly: "it does not do to interfere between husband and wife, and especially as I had only once seen Lady Alan before, but I pity her, poor thing. Remind me, Bessy, to send to Eaton Square to inquire for her to-morrow morning."

The conversation rippled away to other subjects, before Lord Alan had placed his wife in the cab. Her spirits sank lower when she found that he was going outside, for she understood that he could only trust himself to express the violence of his anger in the privacy of their own apartment. It was a rainy night, and, as they passed a gin-shop with its brilliant gas-lights flashing on the wet pavement, Amy noticed a squalid, thinly-clad woman who crept past the shop, drawing her scanty shawl more closely around her, and then after a moment's irresolution, she turned

back, pushed open the swing door and went in. Amy did not pity that woman, she only thought of her as of a being less wretched and degraded than herself.

Their early return to Eaton Square caused some little commotion among the servants, and Lord Alan once more calmly declared the cause: "Lady Alan is unwell, and will go at once to her room. Send Elspeth up to her. In a quarter of an hour," he added, without looking at his wife, although the information was intended for her, "I shall come upstairs."

Amy hurried through her undressing in the brief interval allotted to her, and Elspeth, with grim compassion for her pale and shivering looks, advised her to go at once to bed, but she declined to do this, saying that she would lie down on the sofa in her dressing-gown.

"Here is his lordship coming up," said Elspeth, as if his approaching footsteps had not already found an echo in Amy's fluttering heart: "Is there nothing I can get for you before I go, my lady?"

"Nothing," said Amy, but she added in tremulous accents, "I may want you at any moment. Come *at once* if I ring."

"Certainly, my lady," said Elspeth, and when she went back to her supper with renewed appetite, she too remarked that something had gone very wrong between my lord and my lady.

Lord Alan entered the room as the maid quitted it, and as he turned the key in the lock Amy resisted with difficulty the inclination to scream. She did re-

sist it, however, and lay still, scarcely conscious of anything but her own palpitating heart. After looking at her for a moment, Lord Alan spoke:

"It is at least some relief to see you stripped of the finery in which you had arrayed yourself to meet your former,—shall I say,—or your present lover. I know now with what object that elaborate toilette was made."

"Mr. O'Brien was the last, the very last person I expected to see, Alan; how could I guess that he was in town?"

"That is the very point on which I demand information. You have found means to communicate with him."

"It is not so, Alan. I have never heard his name since you forbade me to speak of him."

"The transparent evasion does not blind me to the truth," said Lord Alan, with increasing vehemence; "confess that you made this appointment by letter."

"Such a confession would be untrue, Alan. Since the day of our marriage I have not written nor received a letter which has not passed under your eyes. The servants know and respect your orders to carry every letter to your room before it is delivered to me."

"How can I trust my servants, when I do not trust my wife?" said Alan, gloomily. Up to this moment he had been standing before her, but now, at his gesture of command, she raised herself into a sitting posture, so that he might take a place by her

side, and this permitted him to feel that she was trembling in every limb. "Words are not needed," he resumed, "so long as your own cringing fears proclaim your guilt."

"I fear your displeasure, Alan, even when it is undeserved, but it is hard indeed to hold me responsible for the unhappy accident which placed me next to Mr. O'Brien this evening."

"Do not call it an accident. Say rather that Heaven so willed it, lest I should be the last to know that my wife is false and shameless. Say now what passed between you; low as the words were spoken, I caught the name of love."

"I only sent my love to my mother, the mother from whom you have estranged me. O, Alan, that is all my crime," said Amy, bursting into tears. Alan caught at the words with the eager jealousy of his diseased mind. "You admit that it was a crime,—that you are guilty in your own eyes."

"I have never wronged you, never, in word or thought. If I erred in speaking to him, it is a fault which need not be repeated."

"Which *cannot* be repeated," said Alan, in a voice which chilled poor Amy's blood with terror.

"Forgive me this time, Alan," she said, as she caught at his hand, and tried to carry it to her lips, but he shook her off, as if her touch were hateful.

"It is enough, go now to bed."

"Yes, Alan," said she, but she paused to raise her

swimming eyes to his face in piteous supplication, "may I first say my prayers?"

"It is well thought of. Since you have asked my forgiveness, it only remains to implore the mercy of God."

The tenor of his words conveyed to Amy's terrified imagination permission to send up to Heaven the silent, desperate prayer which springs from the heart of the wretch who knows that a violent death must cut him off from the light of another sun. She knelt by the bedside for a few moments, and then laid herself down. There was an old-fashioned bell-rope hanging by the bed, and the instinct of self-preservation prompted her to pass her hand through the ivory ring which was fastened to the cord. Lord Alan, whose eyes were constantly fixed on her, must have seen the action, but he made no comment on it; he extinguished the candles, stirred up the fire to a blaze, and sat brooding over it. Once he spoke to her, when a brighter flame shot up and was reflected in Amy's eyes. "You appear to be wakeful, Amy; if you wish me to read you to sleep, I will read Othello."

Amy shuddered, and hid her face in the bed-clothes to stifle a half-uttered cry of wailing fear. Her fingers were more tightly clenched round the bell-handle, and, if her husband made one step towards the bed, she resolved to pull it, even at the risk o falling a victim to his insane fury before help could come. But the long miserable hours of the night

wore away, and Alan still sat by the fireside. Once or twice Amy fell into a doze from which she was aroused in an agony of fear by the fall of a coal upon the hearth, or by the slightest change in her husband's position. As the night wore on, the tension of her nerves could no longer be maintained, even although she believed that her life depended upon her wakefulness, and her eyes closed in a heavy dreamless sleep. When she awoke, the fire was out, the light was beginning to struggle through the closed curtains, and Lord Alan was gone.

CHAPTER XX.

Flight.

THE reaction soon followed the first feeling of relief and thankfulness. The danger was past for the moment, but Amy recoiled from the thought of having to live through such another night of terror. She pulled the bell-cord, which had not left her hand even in her soundest sleep, and Elspeth promptly answered the summons.

"I have slept late, Elspeth," said Amy, still striving to mask her fears by speaking in her ordinary tone: "will you ask my lord not to wait breakfast for me?"

"William wished me to ask whether his lordship intended to breakfast out," replied the maid: "my lord must have walked out quite early, for the chain

was taken off the front door before any of us were up."

"You cannot be sure that he has gone out; he may be somewhere in the house," said Amy, as a fresh dread possessed her mind: "go and tell William to look in every room, but come back to me directly: I cannot be alone."

Elspeth obeyed both injunctions, returning to her mistress with the least possible delay. "Indeed my lady, William is sure that his lordship has gone out, for he has taken his hat and coat. There is no fear but what he will soon come back," she added, in a reassuring tone.

"No fear," repeated Amy, no longer able to be alone with her sad secret: "I tell you, Elspeth, that I see nothing but fear and wretchedness before me, whichever way I look. My only doubt is, whether he will destroy me or himself." She was sitting up in bed with her hair flowing loose over her shoulders, and her maid could see that its pale gold colour had been streaked with silver by the mental agony of the last few hours.

"Dear heart! is it come to that?" said Elspeth: "we have said down stairs that my lord looked strange and wild at times, like the young lord at the castle. Mr. M'Clintock will be the best man to guide him till he comes round again."

"I might send for him," replied Amy, accepting the suggestion, since she had lived long enough at Raeburn to know that the agent's aid was invoked in

every possible emergency, "but even if I telegraph, he will not be here until to-morrow, and if Lord Alan is to come and go, and brood over his fancied wrongs for twenty-four hours more, I shall not live to see it."

"There is another thing which her ladyship mentioned to me before we left the castle," said Elspeth, producing a scrap of written paper: "She said that if his lordship was in any way out of sorts, this was the name of the doctor whom she wished him to consult."

Amy took the paper, and read the name and address of Dr. Curran, a physician only consulted in diseases of the brain. She drew back, declaring that she should never dare to tell Lord Alan that she had sent for medical advice without his permission; but Elspeth overruled her scruples, and took the responsibility on herself.

"She cannot think for herself, no more than a baby," said Elspeth as she went down stairs to despatch the two messages. "She is all of a tremble if there is a rustle in the passage, and, if so be that we can, we must keep my lord from seeing her. You will tell all the lies you can think of to keep him down stairs, William."

The footman grinned, but with a due sense of the urgency of the case, for the father of Elspeth M'Grath was an elder of the United Presbyterian church, and a pillar of his congregation; and her soul had been grievously vexed by the ungodly ways of her English

fellow-servants. An hour later, Dr. Curran was shown up to Lady Alan's room, where she had judged it safer to remain. Since her husband had not returned she might relate her trouble without restraint; yet the tale did not run easily off her stammering tongue, although she gathered confidence from the old doctor's kindly sympathy, and his acuteness in supplying the details which she was ashamed to give. "And yet, indeed, I am innocent," said Amy, raising her anxious eyes to his face, for it seemed a matter of course that her actions should be misconstrued, and her words wrested out of their true meaning.

"Who can doubt it, Lady Alan? Such delusions are unhappily too common in the cases which come before me every day, and it is essential to the recovery of the patient that the subject of his morbid suspicions should be withdrawn from his society. On your own account also it is necessary; for I will not disguise from you that you have escaped a great danger, and one to which you must not be again exposed. Will it not be possible for you to leave the house before Lord Alan Rae returns to it?"

"I think perhaps he has resolved to see me again no more," said Amy: "he never lay down last night, and it was strange that he should go out so early without telling any of the servants when he was likely to return."

"It is probable that he was partly conscious of the fever in his brain, and hoped to work it off by fresh air and exercise. I will take steps to trace him when

I have provided for your safety. Can you go to any of Lord Alan's relations?"

"Oh no!" said Amy, turning paler, as she thought of the reception she must meet with at Raeburn if she returned to it without her husband.

"Then you must go to your own family; have you a father and mother living?"

"I have a mother," said Amy, "but I do not know whether she can receive me, and Lord Alan has not wished me even to write to her."

"You must have some friend to advise and make arrangements for you," continued Dr. Curran: "is there no one in town who knows the family circumstances?"

"There is one friend, one acquaintance," replied Amy, catching up her words as if Lord Alan had been by to denounce the more familiar term: "we met him at dinner last night, but I do not know where he is to be found, except that I heard him say that he was to be all to-day at the British Museum."

"His name?" said Dr. Curran, taking out his tablets to note it down; "it is not a public day at the Museum, so that it will not be hard to hunt him up; and to save time I will drive there myself and bring him back with me."

"Not here, not to this house," said Amy, filled with horror at the suggestion: "I thought perhaps tha you might see him, to ask what I had better do; but you do not understand that it is the same gen tleman whom I have been forbidden ever to meet

When my husband comes to know of what I have done, he will think that his worst suspicions are justified."

"Be composed, Lady Alan. He need never know it until the balance of his mind is restored, and then he will look back to these delusions, if he remembers them at all, as the baseless fancies of an uneasy dream. I will take measures to secure you from any risk in my absence, or, if you prefer it, you might go at once into a lodging with your maid."

"No: I cannot do that," said Amy, colouring as she reflected that she was even unprovided with the means of paying the physician's fee. One of the ways in which Lord Alan's want of confidence in his wife had early declared itself, had been in denying her any command of money; and when she received a cheque at Michaelmas for the first quarter's interest on the sum which Mr. Mertoun had settled on her, Lord Alan had directed her to pay it into his account, since he considered it more satisfactory that all her bills should be sent in to him. In the aggravated temper of suspicion with which he had lately regarded her, he had even put the money for her cab-fares into Elspeth's hands and at this moment Amy was penniless.

"I shall be as well pleased if you can do without your maid," continued Dr. Curran; "she seems to be a confidential sort of person, and may be useful as an attendant on Lord Alan. I have little doubt that Mr. O'Brien will agree with me that your mother's

house is the best place for you, and under all the circumstances you must allow me to act for you; and remember that I am not afraid of the responsibility. Put your things together, so as to be ready to leave the house at any moment."

"I will be ready," said Amy. It was so long since she had been allowed to think or act for herself, that a tone of decision was all that was needed to settle her resolution.

Dennis O'Brien had set about his work at the British Museum with a distracted mind: his interest in the classification of new species of beetles being considerably modified by the haunting recollection of Amy's wretched face; and he had just decided to cut short his work for that day, and to return to his lodgings to write fully to Henry Mertoun on the subject, when Dr. Curran's card was brought in, with the request that Mr. O'Brien would see him at once on urgent business.

"I have been hunting you all over the place," said Dr. Curran, when they met in the lobby: "I never thought of asking which was your special department, and I sent in vain to the fishes, and the minerals, and the Elgin marbles, before I thought of trying the insects. I have lost a precious morning, and you must get into my carriage at once, and come off with me to Lady Alan Rae's. I will tell you about it as we go along."

"Excuse me," said Dennis, drawing himself up with an air of haughty displeasure; "since it was only

last night that Lord Alan disclaimed the honour of my acquaintance, I have not the slightest desire to visit his wife."

"I know, I know all about it," said Dr. Curran impatiently, "what does it signify? Here is this poor woman, alone and friendless in London, with her nerves shattered by the mental torture to which she has been subjected, and you refuse to stretch out your hand to help her!"

"Her brother is the only person who is entitled to interfere in her behalf," said Dennis: "I had resolved to write to him of what I observed last night, and now I will send off a telegram to summon him to town."

"Do so, do so by all means," said the irritable doctor, "and before he can be on the spot, his sister will have fallen a victim to the jealous frenzy of her husband, and I will have you summoned to attend the inquest."

"Lord Alan is insane?" said Dennis, turning pale.

"Not legally insane. There is the difficulty of the situation. He went out early this morning, and I have left two stable helpers in the hall, with directions that he is to be restrained by force if he offers to go up to his wife; but men are such fools, that heaven knows what mischief may ensue in my absence."

"Let us go," said O'Brien, less patient of delay than Dr. Curran himself.

"It is almost a hopeless case," said the physician as they drove through the streets at a rapid pace. "I

heard a good deal about the family tendency to insanity when I was called in to see Lord Macrae some years ago, and he is now perfectly imbecile. But this young man is evidently in a phase of madness more dangerous either to himself or others."

"If he had really intended mischief, I do not understand his motives in leaving the house," said Dennis.

"Who can understand the motives of a maniac? Probably he could not nerve himself to the deed on which his mind was brooding, and wandered out in restless misery, or it may be to provide means for its execution. A costermonger would have beaten or kicked his wife to death in the first fury of his jealousy; but the instincts of refinement survive after the mind has lost its balance, and even a razor might seem too brutal an implement of his vengeance, so that nothing but a pistol would serve for him."

Dennis shuddered, and thought that no carriage had ever taken so long to traverse the distance between Bloomsbury and Belgravia. When at length they reached Eaton Square, there was a commotion in the hall which aroused anxiety, but the story which the three men waiting there were eager to tell relieved his worst fears. About half an hour after Dr. Curran left the house, Lord Alan Rae had opened the door with his latch key and entered the hall. He took a small case out of the breast-pocket of his upper coat, and had just laid it on the hall-table, when his eye fell on the two stable helpers who, paralysed by

personal fear, or by the dread of incurring responsibility, would probably have offered no opposition to his will. But the object with which they were placed there, must have flashed across him, for he instantly turned and left the house without uttering a word.

"And you did not follow him?" exclaimed Dr. Curran.

"Oh no, sir: your orders were precise that we should on no account leave the house," said the two men in chorus.

Dr. Curran shrugged his shoulders at such a proof of the truth of the assertion he had frequently made, that the imbecility of those who had the credit of being of sound mind at least equalled that of the insane. He took up the case which still lay on the hall-table, and opened it to disclose its contents to O'Brien, consisting of a small new revolver, ready for use. O'Brien turned pale as death, and any lingering misgivings as to the propriety of withdrawing Amy from her husband's roof were set at rest. She remained in ignorance of Alan's having entered the house and left it again, and she was ready, as she had promised to be, when a message was sent to summon her down stairs. She came down, dressed for a journey, and closely veiled, as it was her husband's pleasure that she should appear when she went abroad. She gave a startled glance at the two men who were still keeping guard in the hall; but Dr. Curran reassured her, and drew her into the dining-room. "Lord Alan is not here, but we know

that he is safe, and he will probably return in the course of a few hours; Mr. O'Brien has got a cab and is waiting for you outside." For Dennis was already on the pavement, looking up and down the street, to make sure that Lord Alan was not lurking near to intercept his wife's flight by violence.

"Where will he take me?" said Amy, trembling.

"To your mother's house; he did not think that the matter admitted of a doubt."

"If Lady Raeburn comes up, and finds me gone, she will think that I have neglected my duty."

"Let her think so," said Dr. Curran, who spent too much of his time in combating the delusions of the insane, to tolerate the scruples of those who were of sound mind: "it is under my orders that you leave this house, and without my sanction you must not think of returning to it."

The servant announced that the cab was ready, and Dr. Curran's increasing anxiety about Lady Alan's personal safety would admit of no delay. Dennis was waiting on the pavement and followed Amy into the cab when he had given directions to the driver, but on neither side was there any inclination to break silence. When they were seated in the railway-carriage, and Amy was relieved from the immediate dread of an encounter with Lord Alan, she found voice to speak. "Have you telegraphed to my mother or to Henry?"

"I had no time to do so," replied Dennis, "even if it had been advisable. However startled Mrs.

Mertoun may be when you appear, the shock will soon be lost in the pleasure of having you once more with her."

"I know that mamma will be good to me," said Amy, "but I shrink from seeing Henry and Helen, and from the curious eyes of Allerton."

"None of the three will trouble you," answered Dennis, realising the gulf which her marriage had placed between Amy and her family; "it is two months since Henry resigned his clerkship at the bank and went into his uncle's office. Helen is wintering abroad with Miss Mertoun, and since the idea of returning to Bixley was evidently distasteful to your mother, Henry has rented for her the little thatched cottage outside the Manor Farm. Henry and Dick spend alternate Sundays with her, and I was there last Sunday. She was looking so well, and in easy, cheerful spirits."

Amy was a little drawn out of herself by her interest in these details, but as they approached the Allerton station she relapsed into silent dejection. She looked up for a moment when they reached a turn in the line, skirting a copse in which she had often walked with Dennis by her side, but there was nothing in its associations which seemed to alter the gentle, yet distant, courtesy of his manner. Although, by a strange revolution of fate, they had been once more brought into outward contact,

> The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea,

still flowed between their hearts.

"Do you wish me to drive with you to the cottage?" he asked, as they reached the platform.

"Unless it is very inconvenient to you," said Amy, humbly, for she felt the impossibility of meeting her mother alone. And yet how little formidable it was! Dennis went in first, and before the tale was half told, Mrs. Mertoun had hurried to the door. Amy flung herself into her arms with the half-stifled cry: "O mamma! I wish, I wish that I had never left you!" and Mrs. Mertoun's only thought was of how the fatted calf was to be killed for her. Dennis was unceremoniously dismissed without a word of acknowledgment for that day's services, as Amy afterwards remembered with some remorse, to intercept Miss Charlton and warn her not to drop in, as she often did, at four o'clock in the afternoon. Mrs. Mertoun must have Amy to herself, to comment with the tenderest pity on her changed looks, to chafe her chilled hands, and fondle and purr over her like a cat over its recovered kitten. Amy's exhaustion was so great that she could not respond to such endearments, and when she lay and cried silently her mother's instinct was not at fault, and she refrained from any inquiries about the terrible necessity which had driven her to seek refuge at her old home, although O'Brien's brief intimation of Lord Alan's unsettled state of mind had left much in obscurity.

CHAPTER XXI.

Suspense.

THE next morning's post brought a letter from Elspeth, informing her that since the afternoon was far advanced without bringing further tidings of Lord Alan, Dr. Curran had put the matter into the hands of the police. She also enclosed a telegraphic communication from Mr. M'Clintock to the effect that he and Lady Raeburn would take the night-mail to the south, and adding the advice, which Amy had anticipated, that she should send at once for Dr. Curran. "By this time they are in London," she thought, "and they must think my conduct strange and heartless in leaving the house while Alan's fate is still uncertain."

Amy was not long left in doubt of the nature of Lady Raeburn's sentiments. That day passed without events, but on the following morning when she came downstairs, harassed with anxiety because the post had brought her no further tidings, her mother met her in great agitation, and informed her that Lady Raeburn was in the dining-room.

"She will not come upstairs," continued Mrs. Mertoun, "and the fly is waiting which brought her from the station. Oh, Amy! you must not let her take you away."

The same dread was repeated in Amy's blanched face as it occurred to her that Lord Alan had returned to Eaton Square, and had sent his mother to summon her to his presence. "I must see her; perhaps she will believe what Dr. Curran said to me," said she, and since delay only added to her fears, she put Mrs. Mertoun aside with a kiss, and entered the dining-room.

Lady Raeburn was sitting by the fire, and spoke with the same ceremonious politeness with which she might have addressed a stranger: "You will excuse my rising, Lady Alan; I am an old woman, aged even more by sorrow than by years."

"I too have suffered," said Amy, in the faint hope that their common sorrow might soften the heart of the wretched mother towards her.

"You have suffered?" repeated Lady Raeburn, bitterly; "true, you have suffered from the selfish fear which prompted you to fly from your husband's house, although it is still doubtful if he is among the living. You have suffered disappointment also in your schemes for advancement by this fatal marriage—returning to the obscurity from which my son's misplaced love exalted you, with nothing but your empty title. But what is your sorrow to mine, who am doomed to see my beloved son, the last hope of our ill-fated family, sink into imbecility or a dishonoured grave?"

Amy remained silent, wondering whether Lady Raeburn had come down to Allerton only for the pur-

pose of loading her with such reproaches, until she spoke again. "I have come this morning, Lady Alan, partly from the restless misery which will not suffer me to be still, partly from the hope that you may be able to give some clue to the search for Alan. Mr. M'Clintock has been summoned by the police to see two disfigured corpses, in neither of which he can recognise my unhappy boy, and they are altogether at fault. Did he say nothing by which he might be traced?"

"Nothing," said Amy, bursting into tears; "you know yourself how little confidence he reposed in me."

"The discreditable facts connected with your marriage had made confidence impossible," continued Lady Raeburn, with relentless severity; "I date the unsettling of his mind from the day that he was first ensnared by you. His eyes were opened too late to his irretrievable mistake, and he brooded over it until his senses gave way. Even within the last few weeks the calamity might have been averted by a woman of courage and resource; but you have sat still to see his mind gradually lose its balance, and only ask for help when your personal safety is at stake."

Amy felt that it was as impossible to attempt her justification in Lady Raeburn's eyes as in those of her son. "I have been very wretched," she said, "but I would suffer even more to restore Alan to you."

"The fact that you have voluntarily left his roof must of course relieve you from any future interest in

his welfare," replied Lady Raeburn. "Mr. M'Clintock, however, thinks it possible that if my son is wandering aimlessly from place to place, he may come here in search of you."

"And what do you wish me to do in such a case?" said Amy, to whom the possibility had not suggested itself.

Lady Raeburn remarked her look of terror, and went on with increasing severity: "I trust, Lady Alan, that you will prepare yourself for the emergency, instead of allowing your fears to paralyse exertion. You must receive him with such tenderness as your nature is capable of displaying, and detain him until Mr. M'Clintock can be upon the spot. I return to London, with faint hope of receiving any tidings of my son; and, if my worst fears are realised, and he is now beyond the reach of human care, it is little likely that you and I will meet again in this life." Amy understood that Lady Raeburn disclaimed by these words any future interest in her daughter-in-law, whose other offences were aggravated in her eyes by the fact that her marriage with Alan Rae afforded no prospect of an heir to the Raeburn peerage; and yet, to those who knew even a little of the ordeal through which Amy had passed, it might seem a matter of rejoicing that the taint of hereditary insanity, which clung like a curse to her husband's race, was not to be perpetuated through another generation.

Mrs. Mertoun was infinitely relieved to see Lady

Raeburn drive off alone: she had hovered round the door with the half-formed intention of summoning George Charlton to detain her by force if she had proposed to take Amy with her.

"You need not be uneasy, mamma," said Amy, sadly: "I think that I am an outcast from all love but yours, Lady Raeburn bitterly resented our marriage, and she now holds me responsible for Alan's loss of reason."

"I could see that she was a proud, cruel woman when she swept by me so haughtily; and yet she is a mother, and ought to pity my child as well as her own."

"She said some hard things which were true as well as hard," replied Amy; nor could all her mother's tenderness relieve her spirits from their weight of care and self-reproach.

Each day, as it went heavily by, added its weight of uncertainty to the previous burden of suspense. Amy had been for four days at the cottage before she saw Henry Mertoun; since his uncle had gone abroad to join Helen and Eva for a few weeks, leaving everything in his charge, and he was absorbed in business cares. When he came he was tender and good to his sister, but her sense of restraint and misery was greater in his presence, and she was relieved when Monday morning took him back to Bixley. But Miss Charlton's visits were, after the first recoil from a fresh face, some relief to the monotony of the day; and Amy could submit to the knowledge

that her unhappy circumstances were the subject of much confidential talk between Mrs. Mertoun and her friend, although no allusion was made to them in her presence.

"Lady Alan has such pretty manners," Miss Charlton observed to her brother after one of her visits to the cottage: "she was not always so gracious when I used to see her as a girl. Poor thing! it is difficult to remember that was only six months ago when I look at her now, with all her fine bloom gone, and her hair put away under a lace cap. I saw the silver threads glistening for myself to-day, although I would not believe Mrs. Mertoun when she said that her hair had turned grey. I wonder what little delicacy we can send her that she would fancy, George? Her mother says that she hardly eats anything."

George Charlton was soon permitted to testify his sympathy and good-will in another mode, for Amy asked Miss Charlton if her brother could spare the time to call upon her, and he obeyed the summons with a due sense of the honour done to him.

"It seems a strange thing to ask," said Amy, with a wistful look in her eyes, "but Lady Raeburn said that if her son was wandering about, he might come here; and I cannot sleep at night for thinking what I shall do if he comes, and how much it will terrify my mother."

"Send for me at any hour of the day or night," said George Charlton. "I will have a bell fixed to the roof of the cottage, and one warning stroke will bring

me here. Or you know what pleasure it would give us to receive you and Mrs. Mertoun at the farm, if you would prefer it."

Amy declined this offer, but she felt less nervous now that she had secured Mr. Charlton's protectorship; and such was the vigilance of his guard, that Mr. M'Clintock narrowly escaped being arrested as a dangerous lunatic when he walked out from Allerton to the cottage a few days after this conversation. It was true that he was a short man and middle-aged, but the appearance of a red-haired stranger who spoke with a Scotch accent when he enquired his way to the cottage seemed to justify suspicion, and George Charlton followed him to the door, to ascertain that Lady Alan had really given orders that he should be admitted as soon as he sent in his card.

Amy had, in fact, been corresponding with Mr. M'Clintock, and his visit was a matter of appointment. He persisted in recognising her claims as Lord Alan's wife, which Lady Raeburn was equally resolved to ignore, and he wrote to inform her that, as he was on the eve of returning to Scotland, he proposed to do himself the honour of waiting on her.

"It was good of you to come, Mr. M'Clintock," said Amy, "and especially since I know from the newspapers that there is no news of my husband."

"If the papers would let the matter rest, instead of putting in their sensation paragraphs about the mysterious disappearance of a young nobleman, we should have more chance of getting hold of the right

clue, Lady Alan. It is simply mischievous to cross the scent with so many confused and contradictory suggestions. I am pestered with anonymous letters by every post, and so is the superintendent of police. I am sent for here, there, and everywhere to see or hear of men whose appearance does not correspond with Lord Alan's in a single particular; sometimes it is an old gentleman in hiding from his creditors, sometimes an idle apprentice who has run off to sea. Only yesterday I was sent for into Norfolk to identify a swindler, well known to the London police, who had passed himself off as a lord to some fool of an innkeeper." And Mr. M'Clintock flourished his silk handkerchief across his bald forehead with an air of irritation.

"And do you go back to Raeburn because you give up the search as hopeless?" enquired Amy.

"Not exactly that, Lady Alan. Of course I shall be summoned to return if there is anything to be done, and Lady Raeburn remains in Eaton Square with Lady Janet, who is coming up this evening. But we do not think it well to bring the Marquis under the influence of all this excitement and anxiety; and as he is getting restless, I am wanted at Raeburn on that as well as on other accounts."

"I would go and stay with him at Raeburn if it would be of any use," said Amy, but M'Clintock shook his head.

"No, Lady Alan, I do not think it would do. The Marquis would be pleased to see you; he sent you a

kind message in his last letter to me; but you know that Lady Raeburn's temper is rather peculiar, and in this sad trial we must defer to her wishes in every possible way."

"I wish to be guided by them," replied Amy. "Can you tell me what she would like me to do about wearing mourning?"

"Not at present, Lady Alan, certainly not weeds just at present. That simple black dress is quite sufficient, and from what Lady Raeburn said I do not think she will put on mourning for another three months: that will give us time to make enquiries in other parts of the world."

"You think that he has gone out of the country?" said Amy.

"I tell you that I am quite at a loss what to think, and am never in the same mind for two minutes together. But he was not without money, for I find that he cashed a cheque for *20l.* on the day you dined at Lady Hawthorne's, and he was always fond of the sea. One of the London Dock labourers tells us of a young man who was hanging about the docks on Tuesday afternoon—the day he was missing—and he got into a boat belonging to one of three foreign ships which had gone out of dock, and were going to drop down with the tide. He says that the young man went on board one of the three, but it may have been the Swede, the Italian, or the New Orleans boat. It is a sad, confused tale altogether, and so many men have come to us who were ready to swear anything for the

chance of getting a few shillings that I do not credit the story. Poor lad! If he is to come back to us like his brother, I would as soon have certain news of his death."

As M'Clintock rose to go, Amy said timidly that he must thank Lord Raeburn for thinking of her. "And that reminds me, Lady Alan, that I only gave you half his message, for the Marquis went on to say something about making a suitable provision for his daughter-in-law. But I do not see my way to it—I really do not, Lady Alan. The embarrassment of the estate was bad enough before, and now, with this uncertainty as to the fate of the heir presumptive, I do assure you that I hardly know how to lay my hands on a 5*l.* note for the current expenses of the search."

"Lord Raeburn is very good to think of me," said Amy; "and you must tell him that the provision made for me by my uncle is amply sufficient for all my wants. I do not consider that I have any claim on him."

The agent pronounced such a declaration to be very "handsome," and they parted with mutual expressions of good will; and, on M'Clintock's part, with a certain consciousness of disloyalty towards his aristocratic clients, because he could not forbear to contrast their frigid and haughty bearing somewhat unfavourably with the gentle deference of Lady Alan's manners.

CHAPTER XXII.

Certainty.

THE months which brought Amy so much fresh experience in suffering had been full of the keenest enjoyment for Helen. She had gone abroad with her cousin, with her mind in a state of revolt against the seductions of art and scenery, protesting that they could not make amends for the sacrifice of her independence. But it soon appeared that it was not Helen, but Eva, who had surrendered her liberty of action and of judgment to her cousin's stronger will. It was Helen who arranged their route and selected the hotels, with lofty disregard of the advice of Murray and of Baedeker, and who was never so happy as when she had established their party in some secluded valley, where material comforts were at such a low ebb as to secure them from the irruption of tourists. When the shortening days obliged them to exchange Switzerland for the Riviera, it was Helen whose republican soul was vexed by the restrictions of imperialism and of French bureaucracy, and who decreed their removal from Cannes to Nice, from Nice to Mentone, until they were fairly beyond the French frontier, and had established themselves for the winter months in a small white villa on the outskirts of Genoa. It was in vain for Misbourne to deplore the difficulties of keep-

ing house after the English fashion when her tools and her materials were alike foreign; Helen replied that it was their duty and privilege to live on maccaroni and parmesan cheese, and on fritturas which were redolent of olive oil, and that it was only the perverted appetite of a Philistine which could hanker after an English leg of mutton.

It was in favour of domestic harmony that Helen had too many engrossing interests to interfere with Misbourne in the housekeeping department. Her taste for natural science was postponed to artistic pursuits, and she rushed into the wide field of Italian literature, and drew Eva with her so far as to induce her to take lessons in the Italian language. Helen's object was to read and understand Dante, and her grasp of the subject made her an afflicting pupil to her old Florentine teacher, who did not consider that it lay within his province to explain obscure astronomical or historical allusions, and who wished to substitute the amenities of Metastasio for the Divina Commedia, declaring that they were better adapted to display the genius of the Lingua Toscana. But Helen was inexorable, and got up her canto for the afternoon's lesson with research which enabled her to convict Signor Cantani of ignorance, although he could take his revenge in the severity of his criticisms on her halting Italian.

Helen found another scope for her energy in the study of modern politics, which necessarily developed the most ardent zeal for Italian unity. She incited

her cousin to take drawing lessons from an eminent republican, and reproached her ungenerous want of sympathy when Eva ventured to assert that he was greater as a patriot than as an artist, and that he would be a more acceptable teacher if he did not invariably dine on garlic.

Eva's spirits revived under this stimulating treatment, and when her father joined the two girls at the Villa Nervani, a few weeks before Christmas, he was delighted by her look of health and animation. "Yes, papa," said Eva brightly; "I am really well, stronger than I have ever been. Travelling has agreed with both of us. Helen was always the picture of health, but now she is remarkably handsome."

"I must look at her from that point of view," said Mr. Mertoun. "I have not yet had time to look at any one but you."

"Your tone is disparaging, papa," said Eva. "But if you do not admire her, your taste must be in fault. She had always a striking face, and now that she has fined down, and dresses in better taste, I can assure you that she makes a great impression."

"So much the worse, Eva. One elopement in the family is enough, and I shall have to send out a chaperon to look after you both."

"Helen errs on the side of misanthropy," said Eva, laughing, "and especially since our Swiss adventure. We went over a pass with mules—I wish that you could see Misbourne's wretchedness under such circumstances—but Helen walked the whole day, and we

were joined by a young Englishman and his tutor, both very gentlemanlike and agreeable. They took an interest in her botanising, put up at the same inn, and got up at some unearthly hour next morning to get her some Edelweiss, which grows on higher summits than we could reach. I told Helen that they were very attentive, but she denied it strenuously, and said that we should see no more of them. However, they drifted back to our inn three days afterwards, and then the thing was too palpable. They waylaid us in our walks, bribed the Kellner to keep places for them at our end of the table at dinner, and were always bringing in botanical specimens, which Helen rejected as worthless, in the most summary manner. She was as rude as only Helen can be, and when at last they went off disconsolate, I asked her which of the two had made her an offer. Helen coloured all over, and said with the deepest mortification, 'My dear, it was both of them.' And since that adventure she has hardly liked to speak to anyone under sixty."

"At all events she is in less haste to get married than Amy," observed Mr. Mertoun.

"What have you heard of Amy, papa?" said Eva, with a slight change of tone, but no embarrassing consciousness.

"Nothing, except that I met Lady Cecilia in Bixley the other day, and she told me that the young couple were in London."

"Amy often said how much she should enjoy a London season," said Eva. "I hope that they will

come to stay with the Wrays after we go home, for I wish you to see that I am quite, quite satisfied with things as they are. Helen is my young man now; she gives me the sense of strength and stability on which I have always wished to lean."

"Ah!" said Mr. Mertoun thoughtfully, as it occurred to him that Helen's brother might be a yet more efficient support. He had been attracted by the sturdy independence of Henry's character, even when it conflicted with his own peculiarities, and now that their interests were united, he found that his nephew's acuteness and capacity for business surpassed his expectations. Richard Mertoun had himself married his master's daughter, and he did not look higher for his only child.

Shortly after this, the budget of English letters arrived which clouded the enjoyment of the little party at Villa Nervani. Mrs. Mertoun wrote, and Henry, and Dennis O'Brien, each giving their version of the circumstances which had driven Amy to take refuge at her mother's house; only from Amy herself there was nothing but a contrite little message, that she would send her love to Eva if she dared, but must first wait to hear that she was forgiven.

Eva's tears flowed fast as she read these words in Mrs. Mertoun's letter, and she pressed her father's hand, who understood the direction of her thoughts. "You see that I was right, my little one, to warn you against courting Amy's fate. I hardly like to think of

what the poor thing has suffered, and that she has lost her husband by such a terrible end."

"You think that he is dead?"

"It seems the most probable way of accounting for his disappearance; but very few days must put the matter out of doubt, since people do not in our time succeed in shrouding their fate in mystery."

Dennis O'Brien wrote to Helen, thinking, as he said, that she had a right to know the particulars which he alone could give, and in all that he said of Amy there was a tone of deep but repressed feeling, revealing itself most plainly in his concluding words: "It is easy to see how much she has suffered, Helen; she is so changed that I believe you would hardly know her." Helen was very much agitated, remorseful for the hard thoughts she had nourished against her sister, and anxious to return at once to England. But however little Eva's opposition might have served to detain her, Mr. Mertoun exerted his authority, declaring that there was nothing for Helen to do, that Mrs. Mertoun was evidently content to be alone with Amy, and that in any emergency which might arise his presence was more likely to be required; so that it was expedient for Helen to remain with Eva. Helen acquiesced in the verdict, but she was very restless and unhappy; Signor Cantani was no longer oppressed by her unreasonable energy as a pupil, and her interest in her private readings in Vasari and Sismondi was altogether lost in the hunger for news which sent her on many fruitless errands to the Genoa post-office.

It was after one of these expeditions, on which she had been accompanied by her uncle Richard, that they turned aside into one of the busy streets leading to the quay. They both enjoyed the stir and animation of the sea-faring population, and Helen was never tired of watching the little knots of sailors, as they fell into picturesque groups, and talked together with eager gestures, their black eyes flashing from under their scarlet caps. Her attention was arrested by the way in which the bystanders collected round one animated speaker, and she was startled to see him break through the circle and advance towards her, cap in hand, and with a pleading smile, which betrayed his row of glittering teeth. "Siete Inglese?" he said in a tone of enquiry.

"Si," replied Helen, resisting her uncle's attempt to draw her from the spot, and smiling at his whispered warning that the fellow only meant to be insolent. Her knowledge of spoken Italian was imperfect, and the speaker's Genoese dialect was by no means classical in its purity, so that the tale had to be twice repeated before she caught even a glimmering of its meaning. At last her face lighted up with the most eager excitement, and she was able to satisfy her uncle's impatient enquiries as to what the fellow was jabbering about.

"He wants us to go on board his ship to see a sick compatriot—sick in mind, I think he says—who has come with them from Livorno, or London—I cannot make out which—and they do not know

where to bestow him. Andiamo," she said, turning to the Italian. But her uncle again caught her by the arm.

"Absurd, Helen! Do you suppose that I shall let you go among a parcel of Italian ruffians, who would as soon stick a knife into you as look at you? The story is probably a blind to decoy you into the ship to plunder you."

"What a wild idea, Uncle Richard! The man will discover your unjust suspicions, though he does not know a word of English. Come with me, if you think it dangerous, although I should not in the least mind going alone."

Mr. Mertoun, who did not consider that the risk would be diminished by his sharing it, was more provoked than amused by the suggestion.

"Indeed, Helen, you will neither go alone nor in company, unless we have a policeman at our heels."

"I believe that the police are the only untrustworthy class in Italy," replied Helen, who never omitted an opportunity of airing her liberal sentiments. She turned again to the Italian, and his reply to her enquiries gave colour to the suspicion which had flashed through her brain. "Listen to this, Uncle Richard: it is the ship which is called the 'Livorno,' and she comes from the port of London. She sailed on November 25, and that was the very day of Lord Alan's disappearance. This sick man is a young, fair-haired English milord, as they say that they have discovered from the papers he has about him, and I do

not see that it is possible to doubt that it is Lord Alan himself."

Mr. Mertoun admitted the justice of the inference, and although he held back as long as he imagined that Helen was actuated by a Quixotic desire to be of service to a vague Englishman, he was now nearly as eager as herself to follow up the clue. His misgivings were renewed when the half-dozen men who had watched the issue of the conference trooped after them across the gangway, to see what the English people purposed to do with their countryman; but it occurred to him that if they were indeed to be decoyed to their death, the participators of the plunder must be content with small gains. The "Livorno" had only just come into harbour, and lay outside of two other vessels, which it was necessary to cross in order to reach her. They were all encumbered with cordage and merchandise, and Mr. Mertoun congratulated himself, with British complacency, on the more trim appearance of the barges which were unloaded at his wharf in Bixley.

It was the mate of the "Livorno" who had conducted them on board, and the captain now came forward, with a few words of English at his command, in which he invited Mr. Mertoun to go below and see the gentleman for himself.

"A milord," he added, as he noticed Richard Mertoun's momentary hesitation, "as I can show by these papers, of which I have taken charge." Helen was the first to glance at the address of the bundle of

letters which he produced, and she exclaimed with agitation:

"There is an envelope directed to Lord Alan Rae! Oh, poor Amy!"

Mr. Mertoun hesitated no longer, and left Helen on the deck, surrounded by a group of sailors, who spoke with greater volubility and less distinctness as they observed her over-mastering excitement. She gathered from the various accounts that Lord Alan had offered gold to the boat's crew of the "Livorno" to row him out to any one of the three ships which were to be towed down the river that morning, and that the captain of the "Livorno" received him on board with reluctance, and with the intention of putting him ashore at Gravesend. The milord, however, who insisted on going below before the pilot came on board, succeeded after a long and earnest conversation with the captain in inducing him to take his passage money. He solemnly declared that it was no fault of his own which made him an outcast from his home and country, but that the unnatural treachery of a woman had plotted his confinement in a mad-house, in order to screen her own guilt. He spoke with such rational calmness that no suspicions were entertained of his sanity; but after he had been for a few days on board the vessel, his increasing gloom, his haggard looks and restless muttering, awakened uneasiness, and he was constantly watched, and secured by force at a moment when he was about to throw himself into the sea. A period of acute mania followed,

during which, as Helen hoped, he was treated with such kindness as was possible, although he was under restraint, and without skilled attendance or medical aid. For some days he had been sinking into a state of unconscious exhaustion, from which he could with difficulty be roused to take nourishment, and his end appeared to be approaching.

Mr. Mertoun presently returned to confirm the sailors' story. "It is Alan Rae," he said, "but so changed that his own mother might not recognise him. I must get a doctor at once to decide what can be done, and you must go home, Helen, and tell Eva as gently as you can."

"Shall we prepare a room for him?" said Helen.

"Do nothing until I come or write," replied Mr. Mertoun; "so far as I can judge the end is not far off, and it may be impossible to move him."

"I should like to stay, if I can be of any use," said Helen, her voice trembling a little, in spite of her desire to betray no nervousness.

"You can be of use to Eva, none here. Indeed my dear, the scene is not fit for a girl of your age, but you may rely on my doing all that can be done in such a case. Go home now."

There was something in Richard Mertoun's tone which enforced obedience, and Helen obeyed at once. They left the quay together and Mr. Mertoun put Helen into a carriage to return to the Villa Nervani, while he went in search of the physician who had attended Eva, and who had some knowledge of English.

It was late in the evening before the two girls had any further tidings, and they were on the point of sending Misbourne into the town, escorted by their Genoese man-cook, when Mr. Mertoun came in. "It is over," said Eva, reading the truth in her father's face.

"Yes: he died an hour ago, with no struggle nor return of consciousness. Indeed the doctor thinks that although his life might have been prolonged by medical care at an earlier stage of the attack, nothing would have restored his reason. He had sunk into a state of complete imbecility. The funeral will take place to-morrow, and then I shall return home; it may be better to spare Amy the shock of receiving the news by letter, although I shall write to Henry and to Lady Cecilia."

Eva had recovered from her first agitation and was very composed and quiet in her father's presence, smiling a little when he said that she must not allow the matter to prey on her mind, but when they had gone upstairs for the night, and she was alone with Helen, she cried bitterly. "It is very dreadful," she said: "it is such a little while since I thought him the wisest, brightest, most true-hearted of men, and I found it hard to forgive Amy who had robbed me of his love, and now I am selfish enough to think more of what I have escaped, than of what she has suffered."

"I am such an unfeeling person," replied Helen, although her red eyes belied the assertion, "that since I knew hardly anything of Lord Alan personally, I

cannot help feeling relieved that his wretched life has ended as it did. Even if she had loved him, it would have been terrible to think of her having to live with him again, or that she was to live on alone and hardly recognised by his family while he was in confinement."

"And what will she do now?"

"I hope that she will live on with mother for the present. When the year or two years' mourning is over, of course she will marry Dennis."

"Of course?" repeated Eva.

"He loves her still: it is easy to read between the lines of his letter to me. And Amy must know now what such love is worth." Helen's voice broke down suddenly, in spite of her late parade of want of feeling, but the passion of tears which she found it hard to check, did not owe their source to grief for her brother-in-law's death.

CHAPTER XXIII.

An Interval.

"THE year or two years of mourning," glided over the heads of the Mertoun family with few outward incidents to mark their course. When Helen returned to England with her cousin, she found that her niche in her mother's house was filled, and she admitted that there was as little cause as she now felt inclination to resist her cousin's desire to retain her at

Leasowes. Amy and Mrs. Mertoun were so satisfied with each other, and with the local interests of their still, rural life, which did not range further than the calving of Guernsey cows, the prospects of the apple crop, and Miss Charlton's difficulties with her dairy-maids, that Helen was conscious that her aspirations towards a fuller intellectual life would introduce an element of incongruity. In the earlier days at Allerton she had worked off her superfluous energy in manual labour, and had spent her hardly earned hours of recreation in the society of Henry and Dennis O'Brien; but now that the contribution which Amy was able to make to her mother's income placed them above pecuniary anxiety, Helen felt that the idyllic life of Charlton Manor, which had been very welcome as an occasional refreshment, would pall upon her active spirit. It was agreed, therefore, that Helen should reside at Leasowes, but she made frequent visits to the cottage and to the Manor farm, and the two Charltons, listened with unflagging interest to her accounts of Swiss dairies, and of the Italian mode of cultivating the soil; while Miss Charlton dilated in turn on dear Lady Alan's pretty ways, and on the satisfaction it gave her brother and herself to see her look less sadly worn, and pale than she had done through the winter. To Helen the improvement was less evident; Amy was silent and spiritless, ill at ease in her sister's company, and shrinking from the suggestion that she might spend a few days quietly at Leasowes; but Mrs. Mertoun declared that she was

cheerful when they were alone together, and that the kind and sociable natures of Miss Charlton and her brother supplied all the society she needed.

At Leasowes the masculine element was more liberally introduced, since Henry was almost as much at home in his uncle's house as at his office, and was apt to bring O'Brien as well as the younger Richard in his train. But before the two girls left England to spend another winter in the south, which the doctors considered necessary in Eva's case, O'Brien had also left the country on a more lengthened absence. Mr. Wray's interest procured for him an appointment attaching him to an expedition which was to be sent out to the Himalayas with the view of ascertaining the best mode of turning the forests to account. The whole matter was arranged before he even mentioned it to Henry; and if his friend was surprised, Helen was more deeply wounded by such reserve: but they were both gratified by an appointment which launched him in a wider sphere, and Dennis himself wrote from London that although he had much to do in the brief interval allowed him to complete his preparations, he could not deny himself the indulgence of spending the last evening with them at Leasowes.

It was a lovely summer night, and the young people went out into the verandah to watch the full moon as she appeared above the tops of the trees, but Mr. Mertoun's caution presently forbade Eva to expose herself to the night air, and Henry re-entered the house with her. Helen remained standing beside

Dennis, who seemed as unwilling as herself to exchange the dewy freshness of the outer air for the lamp-lit drawing-room. "I suppose," he said, thoughtfully, "that the next full moon will find me under the eaves of an Indian bungalow."

"How long shall you be away, Dennis?"

"My chief says not less than a year, and he hopes not much more."

"Will you take Allerton on your way to-morrow?" said Helen, finding it easier to ask questions than to say anything original.

"No; you must tell your mother how much hurried I have been, and that I could not find time to wish her good-bye."

"I will tell her and Amy," said Helen, almost as if she were annoyed by the studied omission of her sister's name; "by the time you come home, Amy will be able to go out a little in society."

"I suppose so; you must write to me sometimes, Helen; now that Henry is such a busy man, I doubt whether he will give me much home news."

"I will write after my visits to the cottage," replied Helen.

"And why only then?"

"Why? I suppose because unless I fix an era I shall not write at all," replied Helen, a little surprised by the question. While she was convinced that O'Brien's love for Amy was unchanged, it was evident that he would allow no expression of it; and it was only the effort at concealment which would account

for the reserve and constraint that had altered his whole nature, since his earlier love for her had been proclaimed without a shadow of reticence.

When Dennis O'Brien had sailed for India, Helen permitted herself few distractions from the course of study she had laid down. Eva, who had been considered a docile, and a far from incapable pupil in her schoolroom days, was amazed by the depths of ignorance which were continually revealed to her by Helen's higher attainments; but she was not allowed to sit down content with her own deficiencies. Although she and Helen were of an age when most girls abandon themselves to the career of frivolous pleasure-seeking which is assumed to be the inalienable privilege of young ladyhood, they led a studious and secluded life, even at Leasowes, and were still more absorbed in their course of self-culture in the second winter which they spent in Italy.

Mr. Mertoun was too well satisfied with Eva's immunity from the morbid fancies which had injured her health and clouded the happiness of her opening girlhood, to find any fault with the close bond of friendship which united the two girls; although it seemed to leave no room for the intrusion of any softer sentiment in Eva's relations with her cousin Henry. Generally on pleasant terms together, Eva was more prone than Helen to resent his unsparing criticism of any incongruity in their theory of life, or extravagant unconventionalism in practice; and a stranger who was introduced into the family party

might have found it hard to determine to which of the two Miss Mertouns he bore the relation of elder brother.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Renunciation.

It was at the Hollies that Dennis O'Brien was first seen on his arrival in England. Mr. Wray, faithful to the opinion he had formed of the young man when he was first presented to his notice as curator of the Bixley Museum, wrote cordially to invite him to come at once to his house, and Lady Cecilia, who had not always made him welcome in the early stage of his career, considered that his name had appeared in sufficiently conspicuous type in paragraphs relating to the Himalayan expedition, to give prestige to her dinner-parties. When she mentioned in an unconcerned manner that she had invited the Mertouns and half a dozen other guests to dinner on the very evening of O'Brien's arrival, Mr. Wray looked unutterable things, since he had proposed to enjoy a family dinner and a quiet talk with O'Brien in the study where all his happiest hours were spent.

"I never yet asked a few friends to dinner that you did not make a grievance of it," said Lady Cecilia, with a deep sense of injury: "since you do not like the trouble of entertaining my guests yourself, it is necessary to invite them when there is some

third person to take the trouble off your hands. Poor Alan was invaluable on these occasions." And there was something in her tone which implied that her nephew's life and senses ought to have been spared, in order that he might fill that important niche in the social gatherings at the Hollies.

"Is Lady Alan coming to dinner?" inquired Mr. Wray.

"O dear no, William. You forget that Alan has scarcely been dead eighteen months, and his widow has shown some proper feeling by living in the strictest retirement. I do not think that she has even been to Leasowes, and, though I might call upon her there quite in a formal way, I do not intend to do more than barely recognise the connection which is altogether dropped at Raeburn. I do inquire for her now and then, but that is only to do away any little coolness between Eva and myself."

"In which you are not altogether successful, Cecilia. We have never dined at Leasowes since Alan's death."

"They do not entertain as they used to do," replied Lady Cecilia: "I believe that eccentric Helen Mertoun sways Eva just as the other sister used to do. The poor girl has great sweetness, but no strength of character, and if she had not unfortunately fallen under her cousin's influence, I should have moulded her completely, and carried out the scheme in which I was frustrated."

"If you mean your plan for marrying her to Alan,

Eva Mertoun can scarcely regret your failure," replied Mr. Wray; and his wife was so painfully affected by the want of feeling shown in such a reference to her family misfortunes, that he really believed himself to be responsible for introducing the subject into their discussion.

If Lady Cecilia wished to secure the Mertoun family at her dinner-party, she was wise to throw out O'Brien's name as an allurement. Henry was keen to go, Eva and her father not unwilling, but Helen drew back, saying that she supposed that Dennis was not too great a man to come and see them next day, which would be more satisfactory than meeting at a formal dinner-party.

"Will he not be hurt by your refusal to meet him?" asked Eva.

"He must be very much altered if his feelings are so easily wounded," replied Helen.

"Besides I think it would be better to accept on Amy's account: I mean," Eva added, as Helen looked up with a vivid blush, "that Lady Cecilia cannot be moderately civil to us without recognising the connection with Amy, whom she is anxious to slight. I make a point of talking of Lady Alan Rae, whenever I see her in general society."

"Your worldly wisdom is truly edifying," observed Helen: "on that account then I will go, since you and Henry think it expedient." Although sometimes accused of brutal sincerity, her assumption of indifference on this occasion was hypocritical, since she

was burning with impatience to see Dennis once more.

The eccentricity condemned by Lady Cecilia betrayed itself in Helen's dress, which was not modelled after the fashion of other young ladies. On the occasion of this dinner-party she wore a cinnamon coloured silk, closed at the throat and wrists by an edging of old Roman lace, which had been Eva's gift, and the only ornament of her dark hair was a natural scarlet rose, a perfect specimen of General Jacqueminot. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks a little flushed, but the composed stateliness of her manner betrayed none of the excitement which she felt, and Lady Cecilia remarked to her dearest friend, Lady Ashford, that it was really absurd to see the poor dependent on her cousin's bounty give herself the airs of a tragedy queen. Eva, on her side, seemed quite content to fall into the shade, and watched Helen with great admiration, and no suspicion that her own graceful, diffident manners might be more generally popular.

"We are to go in to dinner without waiting for Mr. O'Brien," Lady Cecilia explained; "he begged that it might be so, as the train was late, and he has only just arrived."

"Rather hard on a man who has come straight out of the Indian forests to have to rush into the fetters of evening dress," observed Mr. Wray to Henry Mertoun, who appeared to him the only person present likely to sympathise in such a grievance.

"I hope that O'Brien is sufficiently loyal to his friends to make the sacrifice cheerfully," replied Henry, "it has been a great pleasure to me to come here to meet him this evening."

"His friends?" repeated Mr. Wray: "except yourself, there is not a soul here to-night with whom he has anything in common."

"Myself and my sister Helen. When we lived at Allerton we were constantly together, and he developed Helen's taste for natural history, although he found me an unpromising disciple."

"In that case," said Mr. Wray, "I will see that his empty chair is kept next to Miss Helen Mertoun's. Since I cannot enjoy his conversation myself, I am magnanimous enough to give her the benefit of it."

Helen heard, and profited by this benevolent purpose, which it was the more easy to execute since she entered the dining-room last as the most insignificant person of the company; and gratitude prompted her to exempt Mr. Wray from her sweeping condemnation of the Rae family, and especially since, as she reflected, he spelled his name with a *W*.

Dinner was half over before Dennis O'Brien appeared to fill his vacant chair, and as he did so he greeted Helen by her Christian name after a momentary hesitation. Yet he was the most changed of the two, bronzed and travel-worn, and with his mouth concealed by the silky brown beard of which there had been little trace when he left England: but then, as he

explained, he had not expected to meet Helen, while she was prepared for his appearance.

"You cannot be more surprised to see me here than I am myself," said Helen: "if any one had told us two years ago that we should meet again, almost like strangers, and at Lady Cecilia Wray's house of all places in the world, I should have derided the prediction."

"Turn fortune, turn thy wheel," rejoined Dennis: "I daresay that she has stranger revolutions in store for us."

"When I look back to all our buried projects, I feel that we have been only children digging in the sand," resumed Helen, "it is since you went away that I have discovered that the pursuit of beetles will not satisfy all my aspirations, although it may serve as the by-play of life."

"That is fickleness indeed," said Dennis smiling. "The intensely technical tone of your correspondence conveyed a different impression, and I have thought of returning the series to you with the suggestion of publishing it in the Entomological Journal."

"Were my letters so dull?" said Helen, evidently piqued.

"I did not say dull, only instructive. I confess that I sometimes wished for information on matters of more human interest."

"I never forgot to tell you of my visits to Allerton, and the cottage," said Helen.

"No: you proved yourself to be a true woman by

throwing all the interest of your letters into the post-script. How is Mrs. Mertoun?"

"Mother grows younger every year; she and Amy are so happy together. When shall you see them?"

"Soon, I hope. And how is Dick? Henry looks prosperous."

"Oh yes: we are all prosperous now; prosperous and uninteresting. I often look back to the old, delightful days when you used to drink tea with us in the sordid little parlour, and I did the honours of the tin of sardines which I had bought out of my own earnings."

"Those were the days of Mr. Benson and the sewing-machine," said O'Brien: "do they still flourish?"

"Mr. Benson is growing old, and is not half so pleasant as when he used to patronise me and pay me wages. I do believe, Dennis, that although I used to think that you sympathised with me, you were laughing at me all the while."

"Not at all: those days were good, but I hope that there are better in store for us. How much stronger Miss Eva Mertoun is looking!"

"Yes: that is the only satisfactory bit of work I have to show for all these months. I take the credit of her improved health and spirits, and keep her up to the mark, when she is inclined to flag."

"And is that to be your mission in life?"

"Unless Eva finds a more efficient prop: she must lean on someone," said Helen.

They went on to talk of O'Brien's Indian experiences, and Helen asked what was to be his next move.

"I have a good deal to wind up before it is necessary to decide," said Dennis: "all my cases of insects and botanical specimens are coming to Bixley, and it will take me some time to classify the collection. I shall go back to my old quarters at Mrs. Ball's if she has a vacant room."

Lady Cecilia felt that her guests had been invited on false pretences if O'Brien reserved all his conversation for Helen Mertoun, and she called upon her lion to roar and wag his tail for the benefit of the company at large. He answered good-humouredly when she declared that she was "dying to hear all about the Himalayan range," but the amount of information which she extracted was not very valuable. He and Helen had little more talk that evening, but, before the Mertoun carriage was announced, Dennis had received and accepted an invitation to lunch at Leasowes on the following day.

Helen was very silent during the drive home, taking no part in the discussion between Henry and his cousin as to the change which had taken place in O'Brien's looks and manners. Henry observed that he was quite as pleasant, but not quite so unreserved as formerly: he fancied that he would thaw in a *tête-à-tête*, and readily accepted Eva's invitation to luncheon, provided his uncle Richard could spare him. And Mr. Mertoun, who preferred to do the duties of hos-

pitality by deputy, saw no objection to Henry's absence from the office for an hour or two, since people did not come home from India every day.

"You look tired, Helen," said Eva, when they reached Leasowes, and the light of the hall lamp fell on her cousin's face.

"Do I? I suppose that the dissipation has been too much for me," said Helen, and she was willing to act on Eva's suggestion of going at once to her room. When there, however, she was in no haste to go to bed, but sat down by the open window to allow the soft air of the summer night to play round her heated temples. A great struggle was going on in her breast, caused by the discovery that the pleasant relations of tutor and pupil which had subsisted between Dennis O'Brien and herself were now exchanged for a softer sentiment, on her side certainly, and possibly on his; and that it would be impossible for them to meet on the old familiar terms, without revealing the truth. History must not repeat itself, nor should the treachery of which her sister was guilty, in attracting to herself the attentions of which Eva had been the object, be renewed in her own case, since she was confident that Amy still cherished the memory of her first love, with a truer sense of its value than in the days when she had put it from her. Amy, gentler, more lovable, and no less lovely than she had been in those early days, would unquestionably win back O'Brien's allegiance if they were brought in contact, and Helen was filled with an indignant sense of her

own baseness in hesitating as to the sacrifice required of her.

"If I cannot fight, I can fly," she thought: "I will go out into the world, away from this idle, pleasure-seeking life, which dulls all the nobler instincts. Dennis shall not see me again until he has met Amy, and then the glamour of her presence will revive." Helen's resolution was taken, cemented by tears in the sleepless watches of the night, and executed with characteristic promptitude. Eva was startled by her early appearance by her bedside, prepared for a journey. "I am going to take mamma and Amy by surprise this morning," she said, "the early train will take me to Allerton to breakfast, so that I shall have the whole day before me."

"I did not know that you thought of going there to-day," said Eva.

"I did not know it myself last night."

"Then you have some bad news," said Eva, starting up in sudden alarm, but Helen laughed at her fears.

"You have not the heart of a mouse, Eva. How could I have bad news, since I have seen no one since last night? When I give mother and Amy notice of my coming, they are too apt to burden me with commissions which Mr. Benson could execute just as well at Allerton, for I have no genius for shopping and always choose the wrong thing."

"Since they do not expect you, you may as well

put off your visit till to-morrow: you forget that Mr. O'Brien is coming to luncheon."

"I do not forget, but Henry is coming to entertain him. Good-bye, Eva: if I do not appear by the six o'clock train, you will know that I have settled to sleep at the cottage." There was a wistful reproach in Eva's eyes which recalled Helen after she had reached the door, and she returned to give her cousin another and a warmer kiss: "good-bye my little Evie: do not vex your soul about me, for it is all perfectly right." And again she turned away in haste, lest Eva should see the tears which strangled further speech.

Helen's appearance at the cottage gave rise to some pleasant commotion, but no inconvenient curiosity. Breakfast was nearly over and Amy busied herself to make fresh tea and to procure a new-laid egg, while Mrs. Mertoun had so many incidents of local interest to impart, that Helen had only to listen and admire. There was a pony which played an important part in the Charlton society at this time, a pony of which Mr. Charlton was the nominal owner, although he had requested Lady Alan Rae to drive it for him in a little carriage which he provided for the purpose, since he had no leisure to drive his sister out and the pony was positively eating his head off in the stable. It did not transpire why the animal was kept at all under such circumstances, but Amy accepted the office of exercising it with a good grace, and every afternoon the pony and carriage, with suspiciously new harness, and a whip which was better adapted for a lady's

fingers than for those of its professed owner, was to be seen at the garden-gate. Sometimes Mrs. Mertoun drove with Amy, and sometimes Miss Charlton; and George was generally at hand to start them, and to accept with complacency the praises bestowed on the sleekness of his favourite's coat, the excellence of its mouth, and the sagacity which induced it to stop short at those places where Amy was accustomed to alight.

When the merits of the pony had been discussed in all points of view, and Helen had declared her willingness to prove them by personal experience, and to drive with Amy instead of returning to Leasowes that evening, Mrs. Mertoun went away to give orders about her room, and Helen glanced at her sister, who was bending over her lace-work. "Dennis O'Brien is in England again, Amy: we met him at the Wrays last night."

There was a little sigh, a faint tinge of colour in Amy's face, as she replied: "I knew that he was expected about this time."

"He asked after you; I daresay that he will come here soon," continued Helen; and the signs of her sister's agitation were now more easy to read, for she could see that Amy's hand trembled as she drove the needle in and out: "Not to-day, however, for he is engaged to lunch at Leasowes."

"And you came away, Helen!"

"Yes, he and Henry will have a good talk, and I have something on my mind which I want to discuss with you and mother. I am not wanted at Leasowes,

now that Eva is strong and well, and so I may make my own way in the world, as I always intended to do. How does one set about to find a governess's place?"

"Have you quarrelled with Eva?" said Amy. "If you are not happy at Leasowes, there can be no reason why you should not make your home here."

"There is every reason why I should not live upon other people, when I have brains and hands of my own. As to quarrelling with Eva, I should like to know who could quarrel with her, but it will be very much to her advantage that she should learn to stand alone. She will be dismayed at first, and so perhaps will Uncle Richard, but I have quite made up my mind."

"And this is what you call discussing the matter," said Amy smiling: "I do think that Uncle Richard's kindness to us all entitles him to be consulted before you take any rash step."

"I have thought out the question," replied Helen resolutely, "and when the thing is done you will all be satisfied that there is nothing wrong nor disgraceful in my desire to earn my own livelihood. I wanted you to break ground with mother because she is sometimes distressed by my vehement way of putting things, but if you will not help me, I must act for myself."

"I also thought I must act for myself when I left Allerton for Leasowes two years ago," said Amy: "mamma was unwilling, and Henry was displeased, and I deluded myself into the belief that it would be best for all, as I set about weaving the tissue of haunting

memories which will cling to my life and cloud it with humiliation and shame."

"But not for ever," said Helen: "even now they are fading into the dim past. There is such a thing as being purified through suffering, and I look forward to the happiness which is still in store for you." She kissed her sister, but Amy did not catch the note of exultation; and her pensive attitude as she sat motionless, with the tears stealing down her cheeks, fortified Helen's resolution to complete her renunciation of the bright prospects which the subtle influence of O'Brien's manner, even more than his spoken words, had seemed to open before her.

CHAPTER XXV.

Nevermore.

HELEN'S determination to exchange the luxurious ease of her position at Leasowes for the drudgery of governess life was flung like a shell into the midst of the Mertoun family. Eva was the most distressed, Henry the most indignant, and Richard Mertoun, after the first moment of irritation, was shrewd enough to see that her estrangement from Eva might further the project which he had at heart.

"Give her her head," he said, when Henry urged him to exert the authority of a guardian: "after lording it over us as she has done here she will not find her first step on the road to independence as easy as

she thinks, and we shall have her back in six months quite content with domestic life at Leasowes, or the cottage."

Mr. Mertoun left his daughter and Henry to continue the discussion, and Eva turned back to the letter in which Helen announced her resolution:—"Since Helen always says what she thinks, I must believe her when she says that we must continue to be equally dear to each other; and yet I doubt whether she would have decided to go away unless I had in some way failed to satisfy her."

"You may be sure that the cause is to be found in her own restless nature," replied Henry, "or that she is inspired by a desire to vindicate her consistency in O'Brien's eyes. He told me that she seemed to regret the old Allerton days, when we three used to glorify our self-reliance."

"It is Helen's desire to be consistent which has given nobility to her character," said Eva.

"There is no true consistency in clinging to crude theories which will not hold water. I am not ashamed of having abandoned them when I accepted the hand which my uncle held out to me, and I hope, Eva, that you are not ashamed of me."

"No, indeed, Henry," said Eva, blushing, "but I know that it was a sacrifice at the time, and I have felt grateful to you ever since."

"It was only a sacrifice because I was eaten up by an over-weening sense of my own importance, and that is, as I take it, the constraining motive of Helen's

desire to shake herself free of family ties." And it was in such a sense that his remonstrances were addressed to his sister.

Helen did not disown, and scarcely resented, the motives imputed to her, but she was more affected by Eva's tender reproaches, who wondered that it should cost her so little to snap asunder the bond of sisterly love by which they had been united. Although none of her family would countenance her project, she did not allow it to cause any open breach between them; and set about her inquiries in a practical manner, sending her name to two governess institutions and advertising for a situation, with due mention of the mastery of modern languages which she had obtained in the course of her residence abroad. She staid on at Charlton, where the opposition to her wishes had taken a less aggressive form than it had done at Leasowes. Mrs. Mertoun had always admitted her children's right to make themselves happy in their own way; and Amy, after she had remarked that Helen's way was more likely to end in disappointment, withdrew any further objections. Miss Charlton adduced Lady Alan Rae's acquiescence as a fresh instance of her singular sweetness of temper, for all confusion of classes was annoying, and the contrast between her own exalted rank and her sister's position as a governess was painful to contemplate.

"I doubt whether Lady Alan thinks as much of her title as you do," said George Charlton, rather

gruffly: "from what she said to me the other day, I fancy that she would be glad enough to drop it."

"Ah, indeed!" said Miss Charlton, thoughtfully.

Her brother George was not of a very susceptible nature, and she had never had cause to feel uneasy about the security of her position at the Manor farm, since that little episode with the dairy-maid had been carefully suppressed from her, together with other youthful follies: now that it crossed her mind that she might be called upon to abdicate in favour of a young wife, she was too loyal, both to her friends and to her brother, to allow the suspicion to alter the cordiality of her relations with Mrs. Mertoun and her daughters.

So few visitors found their way to the cottage that a ring at the door-bell was apt to cause some little excitement; and Helen could see that Amy was most affected by the flutter of expectation, as well as the most ready to subside into despondency, when the chance visitor proved to be one of their Allerton acquaintance, who found the cottage a pleasant object for a country walk. Dennis O'Brien did not come, and Helen had been at Charlton for a fortnight before she learned from one of Eva's letters that he had been summoned to London on the very day she left Leasowes, to help his chief in drawing up the report of the Himalayan expedition, and that he had not as yet returned to Bixley. It was about this time that one of the negotiations into which Helen had entered was crowned with success. Mrs. Wentworth, a lady

residing in the neighbourhood of Windsor, replied to her advertisement, proposing that Miss Mertoun should come and reside with her for a few weeks, as a temporary arrangement which might become permanent if it proved satisfactory to both parties on further acquaintance.

Amy advised her sister to accept the offer, as affording her greater freedom of choice, while Helen was disposed to object to the loophole for escape. "I would rather be bound," she said, "since all dogged and thorough work is done under the lash of the inevitable, and I do not want to be treated as a sort of visitor on sufferance. However, I must take this, since nothing better offers, and one advantage is that Mrs. Wentworth wants me to go to her next week."

"Are you so tired of your life here?" said Amy.

"Well, yes: I have brushed up my German and Italian Grammar, and put my governess trousseau in order, and I do not take kindly to lace work. I cannot even rise to the proper pitch of enthusiasm about the pony, although I might attain to it in the course of another month."

"You think that our interests are shallow and trivial?" said Amy, a little hurt.

"I think that you are a wonder of placid content, but this sort of thing cannot go on for ever, can it, Amy?"

"I do not know," replied Amy with tears in her eyes: "after all that I have suffered, placid content

must satisfy my aspirations; I do not think that I can ever face the world again."

But Helen thought otherwise, and when she wrote to tell Eva that she had accepted Mrs. Wentworth's offer and was to go to Earlston Lodge within a few days, she added a request that Eva would try and persuade Amy to visit her at Leasowes. The invitation had been given and declined on former occasions, but this time she hoped that it would be accepted.

It was on the very day that Helen left Charlton Manor for Windsor, that Dennis O'Brien paid his long expected visit. Amy, who had driven her sister into Allerton in the morning, was at home and alone, sitting by the open window, when he came across the little garden. Although the months which had elapsed since Dennis brought Lady Alan Rae back to her mother's house could not restore the freshness and brilliancy of her early youth, they had given grace to her movements and a pleasing softness to her expression, and the glow which overspread her features when she became aware of O'Brien's approach only added to their charm.

"Will you come in this way, Dennis?" said she, his name trembling a little on her tongue: "it will save any waiting at the door."

"I have come straight from London," said Dennis, "and intend to go on to Bixley this evening. I have been hoping to get away from day to day, never so sure of it as to announce my intentions."

"You have just missed Helen, and must in fact have crossed her on the road: she went to Windsor to-day," said Amy.

"To-day! I had set my heart on being in time to prevent her going at all. I know of course that it is no affair of mine, but Henry wrote to me on the subject, fancying that I had some little influence over her."

"We are all sorry about it," said Amy.

Dennis turned from the subject, and as if conscious of abruptness in his first greeting, he began to ask for Mrs. Mertoun. Amy's heart sank within her, when he addressed her as Lady Alan, and she acknowledged the folly of imagining that any lapse of time, or change of circumstances, could bridge over the gulf which her own act had placed between them. She might have known that the help which he had given her in her hour of extreme need would have been afforded with equal readiness to any other forlorn woman; and that now that the necessity was past the only terms on which they could meet were those of the constraint caused by the memory of buried love. But such discoveries are made every day without rippling the surface of our outer life, and Amy's self-possession was undisturbed. "Mamma is very well, and would be sorry to miss you," she said: "I fancy that she will soon be home with Miss Charlton."

"This is pleasanter than the house at Allerton," said Dennis, sitting down with a manifest effort to make conversation.

"Yes: we are well off with such kind neighbours as the Charltons, and you know that I was never fond of Allerton. But Helen says that our country life is narrow and dull."

"Helen used not to be so intolerant of dulness," said Dennis: "I wish that I had seen her to clear up this and some other points."

"I hope that it may not be long before you see her here or at Leasowes. Since she has only made a temporary engagement with Mrs. Wentworth, Henry thinks that she will drift back to us."

"And what do you think, Lady Alan?"

"I do not think that Helen will *drift* anywhere. If she undertakes to do a thing, she is certain to carry it out."

"True: when I knew her first, she was dogged and stiff-necked in her opinions, but never fickle," said Dennis. He was far from intending any personal application, but where there is mutual constraint the tongue is apt to stumble on the very words which should be left unsaid, and when he stopped short and coloured, the tears rushed into Amy's eyes.

"I will go and meet Mrs. Mertoun if you can tell me in what direction they have walked," continued O'Brien, snatching up his hat, but there was no need to go off the grass-plat. "Here they are now, coming up to the gate. How well Miss Charlton wears!"

"She is younger than any of us," said Amy: "do tell her that you are here."

"Lady Alan hopes that you will come in, Miss

Charlton," said Dennis gaily: "I want to see as many of my old friends as possible, and I shall not have time to call at the farm." Miss Charlton and Mrs. Mertoun were enthusiastic in their reception of their young favourite, and their effusion only just stopped short of embracing him. Their hospitality was shocked by the discovery that he had been for some minutes in the house without receiving any offer of refreshment, and tea was ordered at once, and the pony-carriage to take him back to the station. "Our man shall go with you to bring back the carriage, unless Lady Alan would like the drive," said Miss Charlton.

"No," Amy said quickly: "I do not care to drive again to day."

"How fortunate that you staid at home, Amy! And how do you think that my dear child is looking?" said Mrs. Mertoun, with serene unconsciousness that the remark might be embarrassing to the persons addressed. Dennis looked out of the window as he replied that he was glad to find that Lady Alan was well.

"At first, you know, she was sadly changed," continued Mrs. Mertoun, "but every month makes a difference, and indeed Mr. Charlton remarked only yesterday that he had never seen her looking so well. Helen is much more altered."

"Not for the worse, however," said Dennis: "you know that I met Helen at the Hollies."

"So you did: I wish that you had seen her here, but she was so possessed by her scheme of becoming

a governess that we could not keep her at home; and it is quite unnecessary, now that their uncle is so liberal and kind to them. I cannot help hoping that Eva may be a little delicate this autumn again, for if she has to go abroad, of course Helen must go with her."

"Is not that wish an unhandsome return for Mr. Mertoun's kindness?" said Dennis, smiling.

"Perhaps it is, when one comes to think of it. Really, Dennis, it is quite like old times to have you here to laugh at me again. Helen does not do it so much as she used to do, and as for Amy, it never comes into her head."

When Amy found that the conversation was drifting back to her peculiarities, either of person or of mind, she slipped out of the room; and Dennis could not help wishing that Mrs. Mertoun's recollection of old times had been accurate enough to inform her that any other subject would have been more welcome to him. "It is one of the marks her trouble has left on her that she is always shrinking from notice," said Mrs. Mertoun, "when we are alone together, her spirits are even and good."

"Gentle and simple have all the same good word for her," echoed Miss Charlton, "the labourers' children run out to give her flowers or to get a smile or a nod from her as she goes by."

But it was not of Amy that Dennis had come to talk, and he reverted to another topic. "Can you give me Helen's address, Mrs. Mertoun? Since she

was my correspondent in India, I suppose that I may ask her not to leave me in ignorance of her doings now that she is only in the next county."

"Amy shall write down the address," said Mrs. Mertoun, "I should like you to write to her, and to insist on her telling you if she is unhappy, for I am certain that she will never tell us. Poor child! I hope that her pupils are clever, for nothing annoys Helen like stupidity."

"How can you say so?" said Miss Charlton, "Helen is always pleasant to me, although I am stupid about everything but the dairy and the poultry yard."

"Learned people are not always the best company," observed Dennis; "I have been wearied by the discussions of my scientific brethren, which kept me in London at a time when I was longing to be here or at Bixley."

"That reminds me to ask you how you liked India," said Mrs. Mertoun, inconsecutively, "I suppose that it was very hot."

"In some parts," replied Dennis with laudable gravity, "my work lay chiefly on the limits of eternal snow, and the only serious difference I had with my colleague was about an odd blanket to which we both laid claim when we were camping out."

"And what are you to do next? I suppose science will call you to some other hemisphere."

"She has not called me yet, Mrs. Mertoun, but I

promise to give you the earliest information when I obtain an appointment."

Dennis spoke pointedly, but Mrs. Mertoun was only gratified by his recognition of the interest she had always taken in him. "Do not accept anything rashly," she said; "as you have only yourself to consider, it is better to wait for something really desirable."

"How do you know that I have only myself to consider?" said Dennis, laughing; "I shall be mercenary enough to accept any appointment which provides me with a settled income."

Amy came back to make tea, a little paler than usual, but placid and smiling, and she wrote down Helen's address for Dennis, and shook hands with him when he went away — a ceremony with which they had dispensed when they met under four eyes only.

"How pleasant and nice Dennis is," said Mrs. Mertoun, when Miss Charlton was also gone; "his frankness was always winning, and if we had been alone together, I daresay that he would have told me all about his engagement."

"His engagement?" repeated Amy, colouring.

"Yes! he is evidently anxious to settle, but as Miss Charlton was there I could not ask more about it. I daresay that he has fallen in love with some one on the way home from India."

"Very likely," said Amy, surrendering in this assent her last hope that O'Brien's passion for her

might revive. She was magnanimous enough to desire that his choice might fall or had fallen on one more able to come up to his high standard of right, and to respond to his quick sympathies, than she had ever been; and for herself, she hoped to sit down content with the neutral tints of her quiet and secluded life.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Helen Supplanted.

HELEN had a courageous spirit, and an honest conviction that it was expedient for her to leave some mark on the world, even if she could find no higher vocation than that of a governess, and she did not enter on her new career with any intention of being *incomprise*. Mrs. Wentworth was at first doubtful what to think of the tall, handsome girl, who moved so well and replied to all inquiries without hesitation or diffidence; but when she found that Helen never cared to enter the drawing-room, was ascetic in her preference of the plainest school-room fare, and much more willing to do her own errands than to ring for a maid, she loudly proclaimed that she had found a treasure—the most amiable, accomplished, and unassuming young person whom she had ever had as a governess—and she did not speak without having a wide experience of the species.

The two girls, Harriet and Fanny, were less sensible of the advantages offered to them, and would have quoted the saying "*Surtout point de zèle*," if girls of their age had been capable of applying a quotation. Helen's efforts to spur their sluggish minds into action involved a new and unpleasant experience: other governesses had been content with the ten pages of Rollin's ancient history, or of Macaulay, which they were in the habit of reading on alternate days, the mark being moved on beforehand and the book closed with a clap as soon as it was reached; other governesses had never taken such an unfair advantage of their ignorance as to ask any question of which the answer was not to be found in the lesson for the day; nor had they been expected to exercise the mind instead of the memory. At the end of a month Helen herself had gauged the depths of ignorance which are consistent with the acquirements of a modern young lady, and had so far moderated her expectations that there was an armed neutrality in the school-room. Miss Mertoun was at little pains to conceal her contempt for her pupils' perfunctory work, and they were equally convinced that it was "professional" and unladylike to care so much more about things than persons; to expect them to take any interest in the analogy of language, instead of translating the prescribed passage with the help of a dictionary; and to prefer to spend a leisure afternoon in dissecting a beetle or prying into an ant-hill, when their last governess would have asked for the pony-carriage to drive into Windsor with

the delightful object of buying a skein of Berlin wool, or two yards of cherry-coloured ribbon.

Helen's study of natural history found more favour in the eyes of the school-boys who were at home for the holidays; they were very willing to supply her with objects for the microscope, and to help her to mount her specimens; and her toleration of litter and noise entitled her to the high praise that she was "awfully jolly." When Helen wrote to Eva that she found her life quite as tolerable as she had expected, it may only have meant that her expectations were not set very high; and Eva was forced to be content with this brief intimation of her satisfaction, for Helen's letters were few and short. She was partly influenced by the feeling that it would be a breach of honour towards her employers to reveal the details of their family life, and partly from a desire to wean herself from a correspondence which was now her only medium of communication with Dennis O'Brien. Dennis had indeed once written to her, expressing his regret that she should have exchanged a position of assured usefulness for one of which the advantages were at least doubtful, and his letter remained unanswered. Helen thought that his rather dogmatic tone might possibly have been tolerated in a brother-in-law, but that, as things were, his interference was impertinent and unnecessary. Amy's simple statement that Dennis had spent an afternoon with them, and that he was looking very well, had left a good deal to the imagination; and, since Helen's imagination was lively, she decided

that they had come to a happy understanding, and that a formal declaration of the engagement was only deferred until Amy had completed her two years of widowhood.

However much Helen was mistaken in this inference, her anticipation of the way in which the relations between Henry and his cousin would be affected by her removal from Leasowes, was justified by the event. Henry marked his sense of his sister's wrong-headed behaviour in leaving Eva to spend her days alone, by greater assiduity in his evening visits; and, since Helen was no longer at hand to regulate her course of reading, to criticise her sketches, and select her songs, it was natural that such direction should devolve upon Henry. Eva had not believed it possible that she should miss Helen so little, and felt some pangs of self-reproach at her own want of proper feeling, until the day came when this pleasant order of things came to a sudden conclusion. Three days passed without a visit from Henry, and on the fourth, which was a Sunday—and might, therefore, have been wholly given to Leasowes—it appeared that he had gone to Allerton, to spend it with his mother and Amy. Then Eva discovered that she missed Helen terribly. She could not sleep, had no appetite for breakfast; and Mr. Mertoun, who was doubly quick-sighted where his daughter was concerned, saw trouble in her face when she came down stairs on Monday morning.

"I am afraid that you are feeling dull, Eva," said

he. "Shall we send the carriage over for Amy, and ask her to spend a few days with you?"

"No, thank you, papa. I did ask her here last week, but she evidently dislikes the idea of coming. Perhaps she is afraid to venture within the range of Lady Cecilia's critical eyes, who might discover something in her mourning or her manners inconsistent with the respect due to the Rae family. And really I am not sorry, for though I wish to be on cordial terms with Amy, she is not Helen by any means."

"If you cannot get on without Helen, I shall write to insist on her returning at once."

"What a wild idea, papa!" said Eva, smiling. "If you knew Helen as I do, you would be confident that such an order would make her draw off from us altogether. Neither she nor Henry will ever submit to dictation, and I have been wondering whether matters are quite smooth between you and Henry."

"How should they be otherwise than smooth? I have never had a fault to find with him since he came into the office."

"He has not been here very lately," said Eva, colouring.

"It seems to me that he is always here; he certainly dined with us three days ago."

"Five days ago," said Eva, her eyes dropping before her father's look of amusement at her accurate memory.

"Well," said he, after a pause; "it is his own fault if he does not come oftener, for I always make him

welcome. At all events, you may expect him this evening."

On the strength of this assurance Eva ordered a particularly elaborate little dinner; but as she first cried until her eyes were red, and then had to wait until they recovered their normal appearance, it was some time before she was able to see Misbourne to give the order.

When the hour for closing the office approached, Mr. Mertoun proposed that Henry should walk up with him to Leasowes; but Henry replied that he had work to do which must oblige him to spend the evening at his lodgings.

"Are you setting up business on your own account?" said Mr. Mertoun, looking sharply at his nephew; "for otherwise, you can keep my work for office hours. Eva says that you have quarrelled with us."

"Does she?" replied Henry, forcing a smile; but Mr. Mertoun could see that he turned over the papers on his desk with a shaking hand. After watching him for a moment in silence he rang to dismiss his clerks, saying that they might close the outer office.

"Come, Henry," he said, not unkindly; "we may as well have it out at once. I suppose that you have done nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yes, I have," said Henry, fiercely. "I cannot go on meeting Eva day after day without making a fool of myself; and I have made up my mind to decline your offer of taking me into the business as a junior

partner, and to look out for a clerkship somewhere abroad."

"But why do you object to make a fool of yourself? It is not the first time that an apprentice or clerk has married his master's daughter without faring the worse for it."

Henry looked up in dumb amazement. "If I had been very much afraid of such a catastrophe do you think I should have made you so completely at home at Leasowes?" continued Mr. Mertoun. "My only doubt has been whether Eva, who likes you so well as a cousin, can be brought to look at you in a nearer relationship."

If the doubt really existed, it was solved before many hours were over. Henry had still to protest that his poverty, and the necessity of supporting his mother and sister, must preclude any thoughts of marriage; but such objections were soon set aside, and it only remained that he should hear his fate from Eva's own lips.

Eva herself knew what was impending, when she saw her father coming up the approach leaning on Henry's arm—for such a combination had not been seen before—and although she was dressed for dinner, she resisted with difficulty the inclination to evade the declaration by escaping to her own room. They met, however, with less appearance of outward cordiality than usual; and the inexorable laws of routine constrained them to go in to dinner together, and to prattle inanities through all the courses with suitable

calmness of demeanour. Eva wished now that one or two of the courses had been spared, for, while Mr. Mertoun praised the *vol-au-vent* and criticised the flavour of the salmon, Henry's appetite was not better than her own. She left the room almost as soon as dessert was on the table, and sat down in a dark corner of the sofa, thinking that Henry would at least give her flushed cheeks time to cool; and yet she was not so very much surprised when he entered the drawing-room two minutes afterwards, and entered it alone. Henry was almost equally agitated, and it was in an unsteady voice that the first avowal was made.

"My uncle has been very good to me, Eva; he has permitted me to ask a question which I have been on the point of asking a hundred times without permission."

The question was not asked after all, yet the answer was given when Eva allowed her cousin to clasp her little, trembling hand, and cover it with kisses. "Do you really care for such a poor silly thing as I am?" asked Eva; and when that doubt was satisfied, she said playfully, yet not without a secret anxiety, "I have an uneasy suspicion that papa has arranged it all. When I look back through the vista of years to babyhood, I do not remember an unreasonable wish which he has not tried to gratify—all but one," she added, with a sort of sigh of relief, for on the only occasion when Mr. Mertoun had thwarted her inclination, he forbade her to think more of Alan Rae.

"In one sense Uncle Richard has arranged it all,"

replied Henry, "for I still wonder at my own presumption in thinking myself worthy of you, but it is two years since I determined never to marry unless I were in a position to ask you to be my wife. You remember that Sunday afternoon when I left Dennis at the gate, and came in to ask Helen to walk with us?"

Eva remembered it well, and also with what a sore heart she had watched Lord Alan's evident admiration for Amy's beauty.

"You were dressed in white, with a knot of blue ribbon at your throat," continued Henry; "and my backslidings from the path I had marked out for myself date from that afternoon. I was to make my own way in the world, and persistently refuse Uncle Richard's offer to give me a start; but the hope of seeing you again first drew me to Swanage, and then transferred me from the bank at Allerton to Bixley."

Eva was satisfied that she was not only a living chattel to be made over to Henry with other privileges of partnership; but she did not object to hear the assurance repeated once or twice that love for her had been the constraining motive of all his actions, and that he had cherished the hope of calling her his own long before such a possibility had presented itself to her mind.

"What will Helen say to our engagement?" Henry asked presently.

"Oh, Helen will be delighted," said Eva, so confidently that he was inclined to accuse her of having

obtained his sister's sanction before giving him any encouragement.

Helen *was* delighted, and her delight took the form of a great hunger of home-sickness. It was only a slight relief to her feelings to express her enthusiastic approval in a letter to the pair of lovers, for she was convinced that they were too happy in each other to value her sympathy; and she pictured to herself their wanderings through the gardens and shrubbery of Leasowes in these last bright days of September, without a thought to bestow on the absent. When the news first reached her she felt the imperative need of imparting it to some one, and her choice fell upon Fanny, as the most intelligent of her two pupils; but she would have obtained nearly as much satisfaction if she had followed the example of King Midas, and whispered her secret to the reeds. Fanny opened her round eyes, and said, "It seems so odd for cousins to marry; one would not feel really married, without changing one's name."

Helen worked off her irritation by criticising the composition of the remark, declaring that it was contrary to the genius of the English language to make such a use of the impersonal pronoun. She knew how unreasonable it was to resent any want of interest in the communication, and reminded herself that the intermarriage of an army of Wentworth cousins would have made as transient an impression upon herself; but the fact was brought home to her that she was only a hireling among strangers; and she never found

it so hard to keep her temper unruffled by the petty irritation of imperfectly learned lessons, and little ungainly tricks of gesture and accent, as she did that morning.

The time had arrived when Helen was to decide whether she should enter on a permanent engagement; and she knew that Mrs. Wentworth was willing and even eager to secure her services, but she was strongly tempted to throw up the situation and go home, if only she could determine where her home was to be. Not at Leasowes, while Dennis O'Brien still occupied his lodgings in Bixley; and to return to the cottage seemed still less expedient, so long as it remained uncertain how matters stood between Dennis and her sister. She resolved to stay where she was until their engagement was declared, or until Dennis had obtained employment elsewhere; and Mrs. Wentworth accepted her decision with gratitude, and politely expressed her sense of the benefits her daughters must derive from Miss Mertoun's assiduous culture. Helen had just worldly wisdom enough to repress the reply which rose to her lips, to the effect that the obligation was all on her side—since she received a liberal salary for labour which was more irksome than productive, and the process of informing the minds of her pupils could only be likened to that of pouring water into a sieve. She remembered the saying which she had once quoted to Eva, that "life was a series of failed experiments," and she now felt that the disappointment of her lofty ideas as to the mission of a gover-

ness might be docketed and pigeon-holed as one of the series.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Constancy.

Eva's engagement was a matter of greater satisfaction than surprise to the inmates of the Cottage at Charlton. Mrs. Mertoun reverted to what her husband might have thought or said; but his possible objections did not weigh heavily on her mind, and in fact her unwillingness to revisit Leasowes, which was now an unwillingness founded merely on sentiment, was the last lingering trace of the estrangement which had embittered the relations of the two branches of the Mertoun family. Such an objection rather conduced to the maintenance of harmony, since the less Mr. Mertoun saw of his sister-in-law the better he was likely to agree with her: their natures were uncongenial, and he was accustomed to declare that she had no more mind than a piece of blotting-paper which had imbibed, and retained, her husband's mistaken impressions. The letters which were exchanged between them were friendly but stiff; and it was Henry who brought Eva to spend a day at the cottage, and who stood by in shy and proud happiness to watch the effect of Eva's gentle efforts to win her way to his mother's heart.

Mr. Mertoun had decreed that there was nothing to wait for, and it was already settled that the mar-

riage should take place in the course of the autumn. The young couple were to spend the winter abroad, and then set up house with him at Leasowes; and they had begun to plan their route, and to talk of what "*we*" were to do, almost as if they were old married people, for their previous intimacy and relationship seemed to make the transition into a new phase of life comparatively slight. Amy sought to shake off the sadness which crept over her as she listened to them; she felt lonely and shut out from their happiness, although Eva hung about her and kissed her with the conviction that her own satisfaction with her lot must blot out all traces of the past. She wished to see Miss Charlton, of whom Helen had talked so much, and asked Amy to walk with her to the farm, and on the way she still spoke of Henry, and of her father's affection for him. "I hope, Amy," she added, "that you will go and stay at Leasowes for a few days at a time while we are abroad. He had Henry to keep him company when Helen and I were away before."

"I hope that before winter sets in we shall have persuaded Helen to come home, who will suit him much better," said Amy.

"Helen must come home to be my bridesmaid, and then the united forces of the family may restrain her from going back to those horrible Wentworths; but it is a mistake to think that she gets on with papa better than you do, Amy; he was always very fond of you. You cannot shut yourself up for ever, and ought

now to try to cut those few terrible months out of your life."

"If I could," said Amy, in a low voice.

"You cannot while you sit still and brood over them; I long to rouse you to new interests and hopes."

They had reached the farm, and the discussion which had been interrupted was not again renewed; but Eva's words had made an impression, although not in the precise direction in which they were aimed. It was now some months since Amy had been made aware of the nature of George Charlton's feelings towards her, and had observed that he worshipped her with a dumb and canine fidelity, watching for every opportunity of doing her a service, and amply rewarded by a smile or a gracious word. At first she had been amused, and then slightly annoyed, and now there was a fresh revulsion of feeling. She was true to the instinct of the butterfly nature which O'Brien had once ascribed to her in one particular, for she could only expand in the sunshine of approval, and she began to think that if she were able to requite his loyal and true-hearted affection as it deserved, she might still regain her peace of mind. Mr. Charlton was not intellectual, he was fully twenty years her senior, and his yeoman extraction was glozed over by no outward refinements of dress and breeding. But he loved her, and believed her to be faultless, and he was good, and kind, and true, while she was weak, and dissatisfied with her aimless life.

When such a thought enters the heart it rapidly attains maturity, and only three days after Eva's visit to the cottage George Charlton was struck by a slight alteration in Lady Alan's manner. They were walking home from church together, and her little flutter of consciousness when he addressed her awakened corresponding emotions in his own breast. With a happy inspiration of audacity he proposed that they should turn into the orchard, instead of keeping to the church path which crossed the meadows surrounding the Manor farm. The gnarled and twisted trees, laden with their wealth of autumn fruit and standing knee-deep in herbage, were the pride of George's heart, but he only thought at that moment of the way in which his material possessions might serve to further his suit to the woman whom he loved.

"My sister and I are the last of our race," he said abruptly: "it seems hard that the old name should die out, and the place go to strangers."

"Yes," said Amy, and George drew further encouragement from the bashful assent.

"Can you pardon my presumption, Lady Alan, if I say that there is one woman at whose feet I would lay all that I possess, and feel myself repaid by a smile?"

"Oh George!" said Amy, and if the smile came, it was through a shower of tears; "the woman who is rich in your love will look for nothing more."

The tone in which Amy pronounced his name, the confiding gesture with which she slipped her hand

within his arm, left little room for doubt, and yet George could scarcely trust the evidence of his senses. "You must not place such happiness within my grasp only to snatch it again," he said, "my age, my station, almost everything is against me. Have you considered?"

"Yes," said Amy, "I have considered whether I am fit to be the wife of so good a man; I made a grievous mistake in my marriage and now that all the world looks coldly on me, I turn to you for strength and comfort."

The coldness of all the world was summed up in O'Brien's altered demeanour; but if pique had driven Amy, like many another woman, to fill up the void in her heart by a fresh attachment, the sentiment itself was genuine and George Charlton himself was not better satisfied with the lot she had chosen. She did not wish that their engagement should be declared until she had been two years a widow, but, as far as their immediate neighbourhood was concerned, the secret was kept in an ostrich-like fashion. Miss Charlton was doubly affectionate to Amy, and tried, although without success, to obtain an opinion from her as a guide to the modern improvements which were straightway set on foot to embellish the old Manor house; and Mrs. Mertoun never heard the click of the garden-gate without discovering that her presence was required elsewhere than in the drawing-room, in order that George might enjoy the pleasant surprise of finding Amy alone. The very labourers on the estate

knew that their master was courting; and hoped that a young mistress might make him, and them, as comfortable as Miss Charlton had done. At Leasowes, however, where the other pair of lovers were absorbed in each other, there was no surmise of the truth; and Helen was the last person who was likely to be informed of it, since Amy was sensitive to her sister's criticism, and believed that Helen might note, with a surprise bordering on contempt, the very brief interval which had elapsed between her acceptation of the fact of O'Brien's indifference, and her encouragement of George Charlton's addresses.

Helen herself was at this time embroiled in an affair which did not leave her mind disengaged for the consideration of her family concerns. There was a certain Uncle Edmund whose name was continually turning up in the Wentworth school-room and who was an object of interest to his nephews and nieces for several reasons. In the first place he was ever so many years younger than their mother, and comparative youth was a decided point in his favour, and then he was very good looking, rich, and open-handed. "He is always good for a tip," as the school-boys repeated, without the slightest compunction, even after Helen had reviled their mercenary spirit. The young ladies cast a veil over their expectations, but they took pleasure in exhibiting the trinkets which their uncle had presented to them, and took care to wear the prettiest among them on the day of his arrival at Earlston. Fanny came into the school-room when

Helen was sitting alone that evening, to ask for her collection of dried flowers, as she wished to show it to her uncle Edmund, who took an interest in botany. The same request had been made on a former occasion, and Helen acceded to it without hesitation. Fanny came in to restore the portfolio on her way to bed, and lingered for a moment to say with an air of curiosity: "Uncle Edmund was very much interested in the collection, and especially in the Swiss flowers, as he has travelled so much in Switzerland himself. He says that he has made a memorandum on the sheet which has a bit of Edelweiss fastened on it, which you will understand." Helen showed no disinclination to gratify Fanny's curiosity, for she turned to the page in question while she was still speaking. Her colour rose as she read the words, "Picked by E. H., August 17," and she took up a pen-knife and deliberately erased the inscription before Fanny's eyes had been quick enough to read it.

"What did you say was your uncle's name?" said Helen.

"Horton: Edmund Horton. You know that he is only mamma's half-brother."

"Well: you can tell Mr. Horton how I have served his memorandum if he asks about it to-morrow. I do not allow any one to make notes on my collection except myself. Good night, Fanny; Mrs. Wentworth would not like you to stay any longer, for it is already late."

Fanny felt mortified that she should be dismissed

in such a summary manner; but, after all, it was nearly as delightful to know that a mystery existed, as to be permitted to unravel it, and she looked forward to obtaining the clue from her uncle on the following day.

It cost Helen an effort of memory to associate the name of Edmund Horton with one of the two men whose impetuous suit, at the end of a week's acquaintance had so much annoyed her that she had put the whole episode aside as a thing to be forgotten, and buried out of sight. It was necessary to recall all the incidents of that week among the mountains before she could determine whether Mr. Horton were the tutor or the pupil; but she finally identified him as the younger of the two men, the most ardent in his suit, and also the least disheartened by failure — for when they parted, he declared that he could not accept his rejection as final, and should take the first opportunity of trying again. And such an opportunity he appeared to have found or made, after a fashion which proved that the lapse of two years had not matured his judgment.

Helen was at a loss how to act, and resisted her first impulse to lay the matter before Mrs. Wentworth and to assign it as a cause for her immediate return home. Such a step seemed to attach too much weight to an act of boyish folly, and might expose her to the imputation of running away to avoid a declaration of love which would never have been repeated. She resolved to rely on the weapons of her own discretion

to avert any unseasonable display of constancy, and not to recognise their previous acquaintance if it were possible to avoid it.

Although Edmund Horton was not addicted to early hours, he came down in excellent time for family prayers that morning; but Helen and her two pupils only came in with the servants, and disappeared by the same door.

"Do not the girls breakfast with you?" inquired Edmund.

"Not since Miss Mertoun came," said Mrs. Wentworth: "she likes to keep early hours, and they breakfasted in the school-room an hour ago. It is a better arrangement in every point of view, as the girls are at that dangerous age when they take everything in, and pick up all sorts of gossip."

"It is better for them, no doubt," said Mr. Horton, "since I have always understood that the process of education was salutary in direct proportion to its unpleasantness; but their governess must lead a secluded life, if she does not come down either in the morning or evening."

"It was Miss Mertoun's own suggestion," said Mrs. Wentworth, "she has so many resources in herself that I really believe she prefers to be alone."

Edmund Horton had come to Earlston for shooting, and went out accordingly after breakfast, and he made a great point of obtaining a holiday for his nieces that they might meet him with his luncheon at a certain cover; he even proposed that he should go

to the school-room to ask the favour in person, but that, as Mrs. Wentworth assured him, was quite unnecessary, since Mrs. Mertoun was not at all unwilling to give the children an occasional indulgence, and she could easily arrange it. The two girls kept the appointment, but they were only accompanied by their brothers; and, as two days passed over without any embarrassing recognition, Helen felt that she might congratulate herself on having kept her own counsel.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Failure.

HELEN'S tactics might possibly have been successful if Sunday had not intervened to relax the routine of school-room life. The young Wentworths were in the habit of going to the chapel in Windsor Park on fine Sunday afternoons; and although Mr. Horton was usually content to go to morning service, he was evidently anxious to attach himself to the school-room party on this occasion.

"Would you not rather drive with me in the pony-carriage, Edmund?" said Mrs. Wentworth.

"Thank you, Minny, I should prefer the walk through the park if one of the girls will go with you." Fanny was by no means unwilling to make the exchange, and when they were in the carriage, she remarked to her mother, with a shade of malice:

"I hope that Uncle Edmund is satisfied now, for I know that he had set his heart on walking with Miss Mertoun."

"That is a very unworthy remark, Fanny," said Mrs. Wentworth, with due maternal severity; "I do not think he even knows Miss Mertoun by sight, and you have not the smallest right to misinterpret the interest he takes in you all into an inclination to flirt with your governess."

Fanny looked red and uncomfortable, but was only more eager to justify her assertion: "Well, mamma, he may not have spoken to Miss Mertoun since he came to Earlston, but I am sure that he knows something about her, for he made such a point of seeing her dried flowers as soon as he heard her name; and he wrote a message for her on one of the sheets in the portfolio, which Miss Mertoun rubbed out in a great hurry, for fear I should read it."

"The thing is perfectly absurd," said Mrs. Wentworth, but her peace of mind was grievously disturbed, and she was distracted between her anxiety to ascertain the truth and a dislike to encouraging her daughter in a taste for frivolous and underhand gossip.

The walking party had started half an hour before, consisting only of Harriet and her governess and Mr. Horton. It was the last Sunday of the holidays, a circumstance which entitled the school-boys to shirk afternoon service, and they were not to be found when the time came for setting out. Helen came down stairs, looking paler than usual, and stern enough to

discourage the most enterprising of suitors. She baffled Edmund Horton's first attempt to walk by her side by placing his niece between them, who was a very substantial barrier against any interchange of confidential remarks. But fortune favoured the gentleman, for they had scarcely entered the park when Harriet descried one of her fifteen female friends walking a few paces in advance of them, and eagerly asked Miss Mertoun's leave to run on and join her party.

"I am sure that Miss Mertoun can have no objection," said Mr. Horton, and in another moment he had taken his niece's place and his eyes met Helen's. "Now, Miss Mertoun, perhaps you will not refuse to recognise me."

"If we are to renew our former acquaintance, I should prefer to do so in Mrs. Wentworth's presence," said Helen gravely.

"I have been willing and even eager to do so, Miss Mertoun; but, after the way in which you have shunned me, I could only suppose that you had some reason for wishing that we should meet as strangers."

"The same reason will apply with greater force to our meeting when there is no one present to prevent the renewal of an acquaintance which would be distasteful to me in any case, and which is dishonourable to yourself when you try to make your niece the medium of a clandestine correspondence."

"The most innocent actions may be wrested out of their true meaning by such wilful prejudice," said

young Horton, deeply hurt by the imputation: "in the fever of my impatience and delight at finding myself under the same roof with you, I could think of no other means of making my presence known. I have only hesitated to pay my addresses openly from the fear of compromising your position here, if they should still prove unacceptable to you."

"My position is compromised already," said Helen, "as soon as I return home, I shall inform Mrs. Wentworth of what has passed between us, and request her to release me from my present engagement."

"At least," said Horton, "you will hear what I have to say, and not torture me by the knowledge that I have been the means of injuring you, when my only desire has been to make you happy. I admit that you may have done well to discourage the boyish admiration by which I was carried away when I first saw you, but it is a sentiment which has deepened and gained strength with time; and since I am my own master, with ample means at my disposal, you will surely pause before rejecting me."

Edmund Horton was very much in earnest, but there was still something boyish in his tone, which diminished the difficulty of Helen's task. "Since my feelings are also unchanged," she said, "I cannot give my answer too soon, nor too plainly: I have no doubt that you will get over your disappointment the sooner, when you know that my decision is irrevocable."

"You mean that your heart is no longer in your own keeping?" said Edmund Horton; and there was an angry flush on Helen's face, which expressed her scorn even more plainly than her words.

"You were premature in boasting of the judgment which ought to come with years, Mr. Horton, for only a very young man would presume to offend taste and feeling by such an insinuation."

"Then let us suppose the words unsaid. Miss Mertoun, it is hard for a man who is embittered by disappointment to be measured in his speech, and I now only desire to hear that we part friends."

"Let us say so, if that will afford you any satisfaction; but it can be only a hollow friendship at the best, and when you get over this fancy you will dislike me heartily, while I shall look back to an unpleasant afternoon's work with pain and irritation."

They went into the chapel, not in the most devotional frame of mind, and had been too much absorbed in discussion even to notice the pony-carriage which overtook and passed them five minutes before. Fanny glanced at her mother, mildly triumphant, but her vivacity was so far repressed by the late reproof that no remark was made on either side.

When they came out of church, Mrs. Wentworth requested Miss Mertoun, in a tone which could only be interpreted as a command, to drive home with her. She reflected that she could not have a better opportunity for uninterrupted discourse, and went at once to the point; "Is it a fact, Miss Mertoun, that

you have had any previous acquaintance with Mr. Horton?"

"I saw something of him when I was travelling in Switzerland two summers ago," replied Helen.

"And may I ask further why you did not mention this circumstance before?"

"It might be more to the purpose to ask why Mr. Horton has mentioned it now," said Helen, her spirit roused by the suspicion implied in Mrs. Wentworth's inquiries: "I purposely kept out of the way, because I did not wish to renew the acquaintance."

"My brother has said nothing to me on the subject, but you will allow that I have some cause for anxiety when I find that Fanny has been carrying notes or messages between you; and there is an apparent want of candour in the whole transaction which makes me very uneasy."

"I understand that I have forfeited your confidence," replied Helen, disdaining to justify herself, "and therefore our engagement cannot terminate too abruptly. I trust that you will not object to my returning home to-morrow."

"You are too hasty, Miss Mertoun," said Mrs. Wentworth, possessed by the fear that such a step was only preliminary to the declaration of an engagement, or even of a secret marriage with Edmund Horton; "I am most willing to make every allowance for the difficulties of your position, and to receive any explanation which you have to offer."

"I have none to offer," said Helen, stiffly: "Mr. Horton may, as I said before, have something to explain, but I only desire to return to my mother's house."

"If you insist on leaving me, I shall pay you a quarter's salary in advance," said Mrs. Wentworth, but Helen rejected this offer with superb indignation.

"Certainly not, Mrs. Wentworth: I will take my wages"—Helen disdained to make use of any more elaborate term—"up to the day I leave your service, and not a farthing beyond it. I will never have it said that I was bought off with a bribe, to save you from the disgrace of having a governess for a sister-in-law."

Poor Mrs. Wentworth felt as much dismayed by Helen's indomitable spirit as if a kitten had suddenly developed the claws and ferocity of a tiger: "The offer was kindly meant," said she, "and if it is really necessary that your engagement to me should terminate, I can speak most highly of your qualifications for any other situation."

"Including my apparent want of candour," retorted Helen. Mrs. Wentworth wisely held her peace, and in a few moment's Helen's irritation had subsided, and she apologised for it with characteristic frankness. "I believe I spoke insolently," she said, "and you have a right to feel annoyed, although I do not consider myself to blame in the matter. Let us part on the understanding that I have not temper nor judg-

ment to make a model governess, and that I must cast about for some other vocation."

"Indeed, Miss Mertoun, I have had the highest opinion of you," said Mrs. Wentworth, with tears in her voice, but Helen had never felt less disposed to cry.

"I do not think that I have done anything to forfeit that opinion, Mrs. Wentworth, and I shall always remember your kindness; but I suspect that the girls will be happier, and may even learn more, with some hum-drum, conventional teacher, who has never gone off the beaten track."

"I have been entirely satisfied with your teaching," said Mrs. Wentworth, "and I only regret that you should withhold the explanation which might clear away all difficulties."

But Helen said no more, and the rest of their drive was taken in silence. Soon after her return home Mrs. Wentworth had to endure a still worse quarter of an hour, although she had not the same reserve to contend with. Edmund Horton did not hesitate to inform her that although Miss Mertoun had refused his offer of marriage for the second time, he should never rest until he had induced her to become his wife; and when he learned that she had resolved to leave Earlston on the following day, he raved against the harsh suspicions which had driven her to take such a step, and insisted that his sister should try to make her reconsider her decision. Mrs. Wentworth declared that it was impossible for her to

countenance Edmund's infatuated folly, but when he said that he would cease to persecute Miss Mertoun with his attentions, and would leave Earlston that very evening, if she could be induced to stay, Mrs. Wentworth started on her mission to the schoolroom.

Helen was in her own room, engaged in packing her goods, and she continued to stow away her books and clothes in the open trunk, while Mrs. Wentworth took a chair by the bedside, feeling that such an aspect of things was not encouraging. She began by asserting that her brother's full explanation had completely satisfied her of Miss Mertoun's honourable and disinterested conduct; but Helen had stopped her ears and hardened her heart against such allurements, and she rammed down another article of clothing between two books, with rather unnecessary vigour.

"I wish that you would let me send a maid to pack for you, or, better still, to unpack your box again," said Mrs. Wentworth. "I must do my brother the justice to say that he suffers more in the knowledge that he has deprived you of your position here, than from a sense of his own disappointment."

"Do you not think that he deserves to suffer a little?" said Helen.

"It is an ill-judged affair indeed; poor Edmund was always so impetuous. But he is young, and as soon as he can be brought to see that you do not reciprocate his attachment, I trust that he will get over it."

"I do not doubt that he will get over it," said Helen.

"And in that case," continued Mrs. Wentworth, as her conviction gathered strength that Helen was in earnest in her refusal, and was not playing a double game; "in that case, Miss Mertoun, your leaving us in this way seems to attach more importance to the affair than it deserves."

"I do not want to attach any importance to it," said Helen, "but since I have got into a scrape, the easiest way of getting out of it is to go home. If I were to stay, Fanny's lively imagination would construe every letter I receive into an offer of marriage."

"On the contrary," said Mrs. Wentworth, "I believe that your high tone will be of the greatest service in weaning Fanny of her taste for idle gossip."

"I shall never influence any one in that sort of way," said Helen. "I have not toleration nor sympathy enough for a governess, and if I do happen to do the right thing, it is sure to be done in an aggressive way. Besides, I have just discovered that I am really home-sick, and I could not settle down again to my life here in a satisfactory manner."

"At any rate, Miss Mertoun, I should like to be able to tell my brother that you will not take the first train to-morrow. He is going up to London this evening, so that you will not be annoyed by seeing him again; and the delay in your departure will

encourage him to hope that you have given up the intention of leaving me."

"I will take the mid-day train, if you like; although, if it is for the sake of sending Mr. Horton away under a false impression, it may imply an 'apparent want of candour,'" said Helen, unable to resist the temptation to fire a parting shot, even although she had a hearty liking for Mrs. Wentworth, and was determined that they should part on good terms.

Before her packing was concluded, Helen found it necessary to return to the school-room, since Fanny was receiving hard measure from her brothers, Tom and Alfred. The discovery that she had pulled the wires which set the machinery in motion for exiling the only governess whom they had ever liked aroused their indignation, and they upbraided her for being "the meanest sneak who ever ate bread and butter."

Such contumely reduced Fanny to the lowest depths of misery and remorse, and it was in vain for Helen to assure her that she was as glad to go as her pupils could be to part with her. "But I am not at all glad," whimpered Fanny: "I am very sorry that I ever said a word to mamma."

"Do not believe her crocodile tears, Miss Mertoun," said Alfred. "Fanny has spited you ever since you came, and if she ever has a governess she likes, I shall take precious good care to find out that she is flirting with somebody, and get her bundled out of her house."

"Then *you* will be the meanest sneak who ever ate bread and butter," said Helen promptly, and as the laugh was turned against Alfred, Fanny escaped further obloquy.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A Revelation.

It was late in the afternoon before Helen reached the cottage at Charlton. She had felt tempted to go first to Leasowes, but had sternly told herself not to be misled into the belief that she was only desirous to see Eva and Henry in the first flush of their happiness, when her real object was to hear or see something of Dennis O'Brien. He had altogether dropped out of sight in Eva's letters, but she resolved to ascertain that he had left Bixley before she could go to Leasowes with a clear conscience. The maid who opened the door to Helen informed her that Mrs. Mertoun was not in the drawing-room, and since she felt that no preparation for her sudden arrival was necessary in Amy's case, she walked in unannounced.

It was growing dusk, but the room was not shut up; and as, in the uncertain firelight, Helen could see that Amy was not alone, her first thought was that it must be Dennis who fell back into the shade, while her sister came forward to wonder and exclaim. But she smiled at her own mistake when a second glance revealed the much more substantial form of George Charlton.

"You like to take us by surprise," said Amy. "If

I had known of your coming, I would have driven in to meet you."

"I did not know of it myself twenty-four hours ago," said Helen. She shook hands with Mr. Charlton, while she asked after his sister, and the warmth with which he returned the pressure conveyed to her the first suspicion of the truth. She looked again at Amy, and noticed that her usually placid manner was fluttered and disturbed, but still the notion which had entered her brain seemed too wildly improbable to be accepted. Mr. Charlton bade the sisters good evening, and went away, and Helen asked for her mother.

"I think that mamma must be in the dining-room," said Amy.

"Has she taken to sit there?"

"Sometimes, in the afternoon," said Amy.

Helen felt that suspense was intolerable, and she stirred the fire to a blaze, so that its fitful light might fall on her sister's face, before she asked significantly, "Has anything happened since I went away, Amy?"

"A few things, Helen. I see that you guess how it is with us. George and I are engaged."

"You are engaged to Mr. Charlton!" repeated Helen. She dared not express the joyous feeling of relief with which she received the announcement, and Amy mistook her measured tone for disapproval.

"I knew that it would surprise you very much, Helen, and I did not mean to tell you just yet. But you must not think that I am ashamed of the en-

gagement. George is only too good for me, and I have not known before the happiness of being truly loved."

If she had not known it, Helen thought that the ignorance which had slighted O'Brien's passion must have been wilful, but she would not pause to think of that now, and only sought to declare her entire satisfaction with this new order of things. "I am at least as much delighted as surprised, Amy, for I always liked George Charlton, and I think it a delightful and perfectly satisfactory arrangement. But how did it all come about? I am sure that you must have given the final shove, or George would have gone on nursing his silent adoration to the end of the chapter." As the fire had died down again, Helen could not see how rosy a blush confirmed this surmise, and besides she was too intent on working out her excitement in talk to be very observant. "And how does Miss Charlton take it?"

"Miss Charlton is not supposed to know anything," said Amy, "but she is particularly kind and affectionate; and, if you do not come to live at home, I believe that she and mamma are to keep house together here, in the cottage."

"I have come home, however," said Helen, and at this moment Mrs. Mertoun entered, saying in an apologetic tone that, until she heard voices as she opened the door, she thought that Mr. Charlton was gone. Helen made her presence known, which turned the conversation into a fresh channel, and she had to

confess that her first attempt to make her own way in the world had been a failure; and to justify Mrs. Wentworth from the charge of caprice and injustice, without accounting too minutely for the circumstances which had obliged her to return home at a day's notice. She was glad when the talk drifted back to matters of domestic interest, and Mrs. Mertoun interspersed her open satisfaction in Henry's bright prospects, with furtive allusions to Amy's recovered health and spirits—allusions which Helen might have misinterpreted, if she had not already received the clue. When they spoke of Leasowes, she found it easier to ask her mother than Amy whether they had seen anything of Dennis.

"Not since he came over here, the very day you left us. He still has his lodgings in Bixley, but Dick, who was here yesterday, says that he has been going to and fro to London; and Henry told us that he was a good deal altered, so reserved and almost morose."

"I suspect that Henry is too much absorbed in his courtship to see much of him," said Amy, "I am sure, mamma, that you thought him quite as frank and pleasant as ever."

"So he was that day I saw him. But he hinted that he was wishing or going to be married—I really forget which it was—and if the affair is not going quite smooth, it would account for his being out of spirits."

Helen accepted this interpretation of O'Brien's

state of mind with equanimity, perhaps because she did not rely implicitly on her mother's discernment. "Before I settle down here," she said, "I must pay a visit to Leasowes. I want so much to see Eva again."

"I doubt whether you will ever settle down at all," remarked Mrs. Mertoun, "you have had such a roving spirit since you travelled with Eva."

"Henry has cut me off from any future travelling companionship," replied Helen, "and I doubt whether he will be nearly as good a courier as I was. Eva and Misbourne may both live to regret my beneficent despotism."

Helen was in the highest spirits, and it was evident that if she had been subjected to any slights and mortification at Earlston they did not weigh heavily on her mind. The little veil of reserve which had been cast over Amy's engagement did not resist the influence of her frankness, and before the evening was over, all their plans for the future had been freely discussed; but Helen, with the secret conviction that Miss Charlton's constant companionship would be more acceptable than her own, declined to abandon all intention of going out again as a governess, until she had talked over the matter with Henry. She went to Leasowes on the following day, giving notice of her intention and Eva met her at the station.

Eva's new found happiness had not weakened her affection for Helen, and it gave additional warmth to its expression. "I was so charmed to get your note

this morning, Helen, and to hear that you have done with the Wentworths. Your coming was all I wanted to make me perfectly happy, and I almost quarrelled with Henry for saying that he should congratulate you on having come to your right senses."

"I am used to such fraternal amenities," replied Helen, "and I might retort that if I had staid on at Leasowes you two would never have come to a happy understanding."

"How can you say so, Helen? as if I had not room in my heart for both."

"Still we cannot both have the first place, and you will have an easier time under Henry's rule. The only good I have got out of my governessing, is the conviction that I want to be broken in myself."

"I met Mr. O'Brien on my way to the station," said Eva, with a legitimate sequence of ideas, "he and Dick are coming to dine with us this evening."

"I shall be glad to see Dick," said Helen: her sentiments about the other guest were not expressed.

At Leasowes there were the old servants to greet, with whom Helen was an especial favourite, the wedding-presents to admire, and the half-finished trousseau to inspect, and Henry came in with his uncle an hour before dinner. They were both merciful in their comments on Helen's admission of failure as a governess, but rather, as she felt, from the fact that other interests were more absorbing than out of special consideration for her. She felt that she was transported into a fresh world, and could hardly realise the fact

that only three days before, the difficulty of fixing Harriet Wentworth's attention, and of moderating the disputes between Fanny and her brothers, had been matters of paramount importance.

Henry and Eva lingered for more last words when Helen went up to dress, and consequently she was the first to come down and was still alone when Dennis and young Richard came in together. Richard had some papers to deliver to his uncle, and, after greeting his sister with that air of complete detachment from family ties which it is the pleasure of British youth to assume, he went into Mr. Mertoun's room.

"Dick has quite a mercantile air about him," said Helen, "I hope that he will add to the fame of the house of Mertoun and Co. What do you think of Henry's engagement?"

"I think that he is a very happy man," said Dennis, gravely.

Eva came in, and no more could be said at that time, but the alteration in Dennis of which others had spoken, struck with a chill on Helen's heart. When they met at Lady Cecilia's dinner-party, she had felt it necessary to be on her guard lest his evident solicitude to renew their former intimacy should provoke too quick a response, but no such necessity now existed. He did not express any curiosity as to the cause of her return to Leasowes, and he made no allusion to the letter which she had refrained from answering, although Helen was panting for an opportunity to

tell him how completely his warning was justified. Dennis took his share, but no more than his share in the general conversation at the dinner-table, and Helen was bitterly conscious that he was less prompt to reply to her remarks, than to those addressed to him by others.

The autumn evenings were dark and cold, and there could be no wandering in the garden after dinner, nor was Eva even permitted to linger in the conservatory, although a lamp was hung there. She sat down by the piano, with Henry by her side, to turn over the leaves of her music-book, and select the songs which he wished to hear. Mr. Mertoun took up the "Times," and subsided into his arm-chair, while Dick occupied himself with the volume of Leech's series which served for his study on those evenings which he spent at Leasowes. Dennis and Helen had no resources but in each other, and while Helen was engaged in cutting open the leaves of a new book, she glanced from time to time at O'Brien, who stood on the hearth-rug, fingering the china on the mantel-piece in an abstracted manner. He would not look at her, he did not care to ask what she was reading, and the book might have been Greek or Sanscrit for all the sense which it conveyed to Helen: the letters danced before her eyes, and at last she closed the volume with a clap which made Dennis start, and look towards her.

"Your book does not seem to interest you," he said.

"I am not in the humour for reading," replied Helen. "I shall go into the conservatory to see if there are any new plants." Her look invited him to follow her, but she had been for some minutes in the conservatory, watering a plant with hot tears, before she became aware that Dennis was by her side.

"*Is* there anything new?" he asked.

"No: yes. I do not think that I have looked. I intended to tell you, Dennis, that you were quite right in what you wrote in your letter to me. It was an accident indeed which obliged me to come home at once, but I have quite made up my mind that I am not fit to be a governess."

"And what is to be the next move? Shall I look out for a female professorship for you? I believe that such things are to be had in the States."

"Are you going to start on another long journey, Dennis?"

"Not on a journey this time. I am going out for life. I have received the offer of an appointment in Boston, and am to sail in ten days."

Helen was silent for a moment, and then the shock deprived her of all power of reticence: "The news of Amy's engagement has driven you to this," said she.

"I know nothing of Lady Alan's engagement," replied Dennis, with a look of surprise which drew Helen from one blunder to another.

"Then I ought not to have mentioned it. It is a secret, but Miss Charlton said that the neighbours

were beginning to gossip about it, and now it would not be fair to keep you in suspense. She is engaged to George Charlton."

"I do not know why you should be so much afraid of keeping me in suspense," said Dennis, although at that moment a light was breaking upon him which gave a new aspect to life: "of course I am interested in all which concerns Lady Alan Rae, and I am rejoiced to hear that she has so fair a prospect of happiness, after her former unfortunate marriage. Did you imagine that the news must affect me more nearly?"

"I think that tea is coming in," said Helen, turning away.

"No, Helen: or if it is, you can give me five minutes. Let us sit down here."

Helen obeyed in silence, and now that the moment for explanation arrived, which she had so much desired, she longed to defer it indefinitely.

CHAPTER XXX.

The End.

"You have not answered my question, Helen: Why did you suppose that Lady Alan's marriage must exile me from England?"

"What does it signify, since it seems that I thought wrong?" replied Helen, with some petulance.

"To me it signifies a good deal. For if we have been at cross purposes all this while, it is not too late to set it right."

Helen's heart leaped at that saying, but she resolutely set her face to betray none of the agitation which she felt.

"From the day that Amy retracted her promise," continued Dennis, "and trampled my love underfoot as a worthless thing, I put it out of my heart at once and for ever. It was not *her* that I had loved, since she was faithless to the ideal I had formed of her, and I believed that I should never love woman more. I think that it was when I came to you at Swanage, with a heart softened by pity for the wretched fate she had worked out for herself, that the possibility of winning the affections of one who was sometimes rugged, but always true, and transparent to a fault, first occurred to my mind."

"You mean," said Helen, smiling a little, as she recovered her self-possession, "that you thought me, what I know myself to have been, the most uncouth, unlovely girl you had ever seen."

"I did not think you perfect," replied Dennis, "but we both know the law of nature, that the higher organism takes longer to attain perfection."

"If I follow that law, Dennis, I shall be a perfect organism by the time I am sixty-eight, for it will take another fifty years to smooth away all my rugged edges."

"*I* shall find out that tea is getting cold if you do not intend to listen to me," said Dennis: and he was allowed to continue his explanation.

"When I saw you again, after your winter abroad, my mind was quite made up, but since I had agreed to join the Himalayan expedition, and there were the risks of climate and my uncertain income to consider, I determined not to declare myself lest you should be fettered by any engagement. I asked you to write to me; but I often chafed against the constrained and guarded tone of your letters, and when I looked over them the other day, I destroyed the whole collection in my vexation."

"After you promised to restore them to me for the Entomological Journal," said Helen.

"That evening," continued Dennis, resisting all her efforts to introduce a lighter vein into the conversation, "your manner at dinner led me to hope that you were less indifferent than you wished to ap-

pear. I came here next day and was bitterly disappointed to find you gone, as if for the very purpose of avoiding me. I had to go to London next day; and when I returned to Bixley and heard of your intention to go out as a governess, I followed you to Charlton, only to find you gone again. Then I wrote to you, and you never answered my letter."

"It was such a letter," replied Helen, "that if you were to read it again, you would allow that it also deserves to be destroyed. The hard, dictatorial tone seemed intended to rouse my spirit of opposition, and especially as I thought that you were presuming on our future relationship."

"Probably it was disagreeable. I was disappointed and sore at heart, and at war with all the world. My friendship with Henry, which had not been weakened by my first disappointment, could not survive this fresh shock; for I thought that he must be selfishly absorbed in his own happiness, not to discover the truth and help me to come to a right understanding with you."

"As if brothers ever did take any interest in their sisters' love affairs," said Helen.

"And so, Helen, when I found that you did not intend to answer my letter, I gave it all up; and, because I did not think England wide enough to contain us both, I determined to seek employment abroad. I closed with this offer from Boston, although I might have done as well or better here, because a young New Englander whom I met at Bombay had interested

himself to get the appointment for me; and it would not be acting fairly by him to throw it up now."

"The moral of the whole is, that I must answer the next letter which you write," said Helen.

"Answer the next question, and it will be enough. I am not now afraid to ask whether you love me well enough to be my wife."

"Certainly I do, Dennis: I have never loved any one else, and so long as I can be with you it matters little in which hemisphere it is." The statement was frank enough to satisfy the most exacting lover, but Dennis did not object to hear it repeated once or twice in different words. It was many months since the unconscious freedom of their youthful friendship had given place to the knowledge that happiness must be attained by filling the void in the heart, as well as by expanding the powers of intellect; and their mutual self-control added strength to the passion which was now at length to find expression.

"It is strange," said Helen, presently, "to think how widely we have departed from the programme of the parts we were to play in life. Before Amy went to live at Leasowes, she thought that we were losing caste if I even stopped to speak to Mr. Charlton in the street, and Henry opposed her going to live with Eva, chiefly because he was determined that we should none of us be beholden to Uncle Richard. And I—"

"And you," said Dennis, smiling, "may still become a candidate for a female professorship at some college

in the States, with the further advantage of getting a free passage out, if you go out to America as my wife."

Helen's was the last of the three Mertoun marriages to be arranged, but it was the first to take place. O'Brien, who was determined to take his bride with him, transferred his passage to a ship which was to sail a fortnight later, and the preparations for the wedding were hurried on with what Lady Cecilia Wray considered to be most unseemly haste. Mr. Mertoun shook his head over the imprudence of the marriage, and reminded O'Brien that he had nothing to depend upon but his own health and exertions; but the force of his objections was modified by the settlement which he proposed to make on Helen. Mrs. Mertoun had no misgivings, since she had always liked Dennis nearly as well as her own children, and was also well-pleased to declare that she had been the first to discover his matrimonial intentions.

Helen lost no time in announcing her engagement to Mrs. Wentworth, and her satisfaction was perhaps the most heartfelt. Her affectionate congratulations, accompanied by a present of costly plate, seemed to belie Helen's assertion that her career at Earlston Lodge had been a signal failure; but Helen herself accepted the gift with moderate enthusiasm, regarding it as a testimonial of gratitude for the effectual extinction of Mr. Horton's misplaced affection.

Lady Cecilia had consistently depreciated "the Allerton Mertouns," as she designated them, and found

as much to blame in the mercenary spirit evinced in Henry's successful suit to his cousin, as in his sister's indecorous haste to get married to O'Brien: but the climax of her indignation was only reached when the report of Lady Alan Rae's engagement reached her ears. George Charlton was, as she wrote to Lady Raeburn, "an elderly man, rich of course, but of the farmer class, positively a *mere* farmer," she repeated, with the adjective carefully underlined. It need scarcely be said that her strictures received the fullest assent at Raeburn Castle. When it was necessary to make any allusion to her son's widow, Lady Raeburn spoke of her as a "creature," and she was apt to add that since it was no longer possible to recognise Mrs. George Charlton while she lived, the Raeburn family must decline to wear mourning for her when she died. But as the placid tenor of Amy's life at the Manor farm has been hitherto unclouded by sickness, or sorrow, or death, such a mode of testifying to her degradation in the eyes of her aristocratic connections, has not been put in practice.

THE END.

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